

Those Places Where We've Been Together by Gazyrlezon

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Summary:

When Will opened his eyes, terror overwhelmed him for a moment. Shaking and shuddering as he was it took him a while to calm down again, trying to keep any shrieks or sobs from escaping his mouth. Only then did he dare to look. It was still dark, and the house lay silent in the night.

Three months after Will was gone for a week, El comes back to Hawkins. But she doesn't come without reason, and the monster that's chased her out from hiding certainly doesn't care much about the well-being of any of their little group of friends, or about those of anyone else ... someone's got to stop it, but before that there's a whole lot of other issues waiting to be dealt with.

1. Will

When Will opened his eyes, terror overwhelmed him for a moment. Shaking and shuddering as he was it took him a while to calm down again, trying to keep any shrieks or sobs from escaping his mouth. Only then, did he dare to look. It was still dark, and the house lay silent in the night.

As if it hadn't been enough to be plagued in his dreams in the first place, he apparently couldn't even sleep through a whole night, instead emerging high-alert and dead-tired sometime in the middle of it. Now he'd have to try and fall asleep all over again, and no matter how much he knew and felt that he couldn't stay awake another minute that didn't make it any easier.

Hey, y'all, just look at this sorry excuse for a fag! He can't even fall asleep properly on his own!

His mind still numb from sleep, Will tried to ignore that voice. It sounded like Troy, and it sounded like his father, and Will really didn't need it right now. Not that he had any success with that.

Feel like wetting your bed from fear, eh, fag?

Turning his body around, Will tried to get himself into a potentially more comfortable position, hoping that maybe that'd help, somehow. It didn't, of course (*why did I ever even hope it would? It never did before*) and instead he was now acutely aware of exactly how much he'd sweated into his blanket. Thrashing madly, tiredly, Will was desperate to just close his eyes again, really, he *was*, but of course he couldn't help but fear what he'd see then. The woods. His castle, once built to be a safe haven from Lonnie, now a mockery of everything he'd ever loved it for. Thick, snowflake-like pollen floating through the air, glowing blue, and the muddy, thick, greasy water that he'd been forced to drink.

And of course, shadows moving. Something screaming. Once or twice, *someone* screaming. And then figure in the dark, its mouth like a flower, open, screaming, rings of teeth working against each other, crushing ...

Quit that! Why can't you just, for once, just once, forget it?

Close to tears, Will realized that this night was far from over.

In his sleep he screamed

When he woke again, it was early morning. Looking outside the window, Will could detect only the barest hint of the sun coming up; really, it was still much too early to get up. But the prospect of getting back to sleep didn't seem inviting, either; certainly his jumbled-up bed, still damp from his own sweat, wouldn't feel very comfortable right now. In maybe an hour or two his mom and Jonathan would wake up, and then there'd be a short breakfast and he'd go to school.

Funny, isn't it? Put that way, those days seem almost normal.

Will certainly wished very much that his days would *feel* as normal as they sounded. Just another boy going to school, like every other on every other day (except for weekends, of course, weekends would be free). Only most boys didn't wake up so much earlier than the rest of their family, and weren't screaming or crying when they did so. But lying back down was not an option, he'd already decided that. Going back to sleep would do no one any good. What then?

First, grab a bunch of clothes. Half of them needed to be washed, and the other half wouldn't really fit him, but Will didn't care much about that. Only he couldn't give the dirty half to his mum, or else she'd see the bloodstains on them. Well. At least they weren't the blanket he'd woken up under; really, they couldn't be any worse. Next? After all, this wasn't the first time he'd begun a day like this.

There was, he'd found, a peculiar sort of silence that covered the world every morning when no one was awake (no one except him). Will tiptoed into the living room as quietly as he could manage; if he had to be awake this early, then, he thought, at least his mother and brother should get their sleep without any unpleasant interruptions. Once there he grabbed his crayons from where he'd left them yesterday, thrown all over the sofa, and sat down at the table, where he began to draw.

Really, he thought, making rough strokes across the paper, shaping things out, *it's weird how much I hate this*. He wasn't stupid, he knew that his mom and Jonathan were just behind a wall, but the morning silence always made him feel so alone, as if there was no one else in this world (and that was a feeling he'd come to know all too well, *there*). *Still*, he thought, now gradually refining things, adding details to what he decided would become a magician's coat, *it's better than sleep, at least*. Numbly, still only half awake, he first thought he'd leave the coat white, like Gandalf's, before deciding different and painting it first a bright red, then black. Now the two colors overlapping made it look as if the man were bleeding. Not really thinking, he threw some rougher strokes around his injured-looking wizard, which he'd meant to look like a forest. Too late he remembered that it was still the thick black crayon in his hand, and not the thin pencil he normally used for outlines. And though he'd thought to paint a magician taking a stroll through a magic forest, the paper now looked as if it displayed something different altogether, a bleeding dark figure surrounded by huge unseen shadows. *Oh dear*, he thought, *this is going to be one of those drawings*.

He'd never actually planned or thought about it, but these days, most of what he drew fitted in one of two well-defined categories. There were the huge, sprawling riots of color that always *looked* like whoever'd made them was as happy as happy could be (*only he wasn't, of course he wasn't, this was just a masquerade he performed so no one else had to worry*), and then there were the ones that reminded him of ... *there*. Neither of them he could never stand to look at once they were finished; Will kept them stuffed in a drawer, deep beneath his lesser-used textbooks for school so he wouldn't stumble upon them, and have to see them.

The one he worked on now was definitely in the latter group.

Sometimes he wished he'd be less into drawing and more into photography, like Jonathan was, at least then he could've just taken pictures of the *real* woods, without the Upside Down constantly creeping in. Of course, then there also wouldn't be any magicians in the pictures, and anyways then he'd need a darkroom, which meant membership in the photography club at school, which meant *talking* to people whom he didn't know. Though he'd occasionally considered

it, Will had never been able to get himself to say something, *anything*, to someone whom he didn't trust at least a little.

Weakling wimpy fag, Troy taunted in his head.

So instead he threw himself into painting. If he made this one more and more detailed, he reasoned, then at least he wouldn't have to start another one and have that one turn south on him as well. And so he sat there, drawing, adding detail upon detail, little spots of different grays here and a little more black or red there. If it hadn't been all so horrible, then it probably would've been a really nice drawing. And it still was, in its own way; if he were to show it someone he'd probably get complemented on his talent, but Will felt that there was nothing to be proud of in a piece of paper which had the stuff of his nightmares on it.

By the time he was through with it the sun had come up and Will was ready to stuff that one into his drawer as well. First, though, a visit to the bathroom (*don't even think about it*). There, a pale, tired, sickly-looking boy stared back at him through the mirror, waiting for what would inevitably happen next. He retched, once. Will tried not to think much about it (*but oh was that hard when in class and choking, and panicking at the thought of what he'd do if the teacher didn't allow him to run to the bathroom*), and flushed the slug-like horror down the sink.

Suddenly there was a tap on the door, and Will jumped, his every muscle tense. Sometimes there'd be flashes, sometimes he'd be *there* for a moment or two ...

"You in there, buddy?" came Jonathan's voice, "you woken up early again?"

Will snapped out of whatever he'd lost himself in. *Breathe*, he told himself, *it's just your brother, and he ain't any monster, more like the opposite*.

"Yeah," he called back.

"Okay, so, well, I'm making breakfast, so if you want something to eat —"

"I'll be there in a second." It was an effort to keep his voice from going haywire.

Will might not be particularly hungry after just vomiting a slug, but he'd found that if he put enough salt on the scrambled eggs Jonathan made him then at least that horrible taste wouldn't linger quite as strong for quite as long. So he washed his hands, grabbed the drawing he'd made (thank God he'd taken it with him, otherwise Jonathan would've seen it lying on the kitchen table) and ran back into his own room where he stuffed it into that drawer to the other hideous paintings in there, crumpling it as he did so (he'd considered throwing them out, but then *someone*'d see them, even if just the man collecting the trashcans).

Only then did he go up front again, ready to face scrambled eggs and morning conversation.

"Morning Mum," he called out, passing her door. "Morning," it came back, still sounding sleepy. Jonathan was a lot better at getting up early than his mum was, most times.

"Morning Will," his brother offered, the pan in hand and spreading the smell of nicely frying eggs, "You slept well?"

Sometimes Will wondered why Jonathan still bothered to ask. Except then he'd think about how he'd feel if his brother *didn't* ask to instead just assume that Will'd gone through another horrible night, and that, he thought, would be even worse. Better keep up that pretense of normality. And in any case, Jonathan had never really pressed him to actually *answer* that question, or answer it truthfully.

When his mum came into the room minutes later Will was busy burying his portion beneath as much salt as he possibly could. Jonathan took one look at him, raised an eyebrow and asked him if he was sure if still wanted to eat that. If he hadn't been thinking about the drawing he'd just hidden and the slug down the drain, Will might've laughed at that comment and retorted that his brother had no idea on how to properly salt an egg, because that sounded like something the old Will might've said. Instead, he shoveled the stuff in, and finally got his mouth too overwhelmed with salt to care about slug-slime. That was the thing, really; he couldn't get that taste *out*,

not permanently; all Will could do was to cover it with something else. It would still come back later, but that'd take a while, now, at least.

His mother took one look at him, then stopped short from her usual hurrying self.

"You all right Will?"

He nodded. "Yeah," he said, "sure."

"You look a bit pale today, honey." From her tone, it wasn't just a bit, either. More like the understatement of the century. "You sure you want to go to school like this?"

It took some effort, but Will nodded again. "'Course."

"'Cause if not, I could just phone —"

"No, mum, I'm *fine*, really, I want to go to school."

Otherwise, he thought, *I'll be alone here all day*. And he wasn't at all sure what he'd do then.

It wasn't long before Will regretted his determination to get out and to school rather than staying back at home. Not only was there Troy and his gang to worry about — maybe they didn't attack *him* as much anymore since he'd come back, but that didn't make it any easier when they showed up to bully Mike, or mock Dustin's missing teeth — but he couldn't even pretend to have fun with his own friends. Not properly. Halfway through conversations he'd become to unfocused to really follow whatever the others were saying, and if there was one thing worse than seeing Mike thrown over by Troy than it was not being able to look at him or any of the others while they waited for him to say something — answer a question, perhaps, he could never be sure — and he just *couldn't*, because he'd have no idea what the conversation was even about at that point. Too often he felt like any second now he'd fall over and back into sleep.

No matter how hard he'd try to keep up, it drained him, and between that and school there was hardly anything of him left that was

capable of keeping his eyes open. His head kept dropping away during English to the point that even Mrs Robbins commented on that, and though it was probably kindly-meant he still shot up with his cheeks burning for all the others to see, while Troy and his friends laughed at him. And as if that wasn't bad enough already, he then *actually* fell asleep to Mr. Clarke's teaching later, no matter how compelling he found the man's explanations otherwise. Normally, this was the one hour of school that he actually enjoyed.

But today he only noticed how much he'd missed when, at the end of the lesson, Mike and Dustin shook him awake again. Clumsily he rubbed his eyes before noticing he wasn't in a bed but in a science classroom, then slowly becoming aware that Dustin, Mike and Lucas stood around his desk with Mr. Clarke in the background. Shocked, startled and angry with himself he started gathering his pen and textbook, quickly stuffing both away into his bag.

"Sorry Mr. Clarke," he mumbled, then got up and almost fell over. His back might hurt horribly after lying on that hard wooden chair, but somehow every cell in his body still longed for him to sit back down there and close his eyes again, pain be damned.

Why can I sleep at school, when I can't even stay still in my own bed?

Steading himself again, he hurried towards the door, almost without noticing that he'd bumped into Dustin's desk as he did so.

"Will?"

However much he might respect him, Mr. Clarke's voice was the last thing he wanted to hear right now. Still, it was his own fault for falling asleep in the man's classroom, so Will gave a sigh, stopped and turned around.

"I'm really sorry, Mr. Clarke," he started, eager to cut any sort of admonishment short before the man could even start, "I shouldn't have —"

"Will," he found himself cut short, "I think you should try to get some sleep."

Though his friends firmly insisted that no one'd told any of their teachers *anything*, sometimes Will wondered how much they actually knew, or suspected. After all, it *had* been Mr. Clarke who'd told the others about alternate worlds and the sensory deprivation tank. It seemed mad that the man should be able to guess anything from that alone, but ...

No, this was just his mind wandering of to weird tangents that didn't make any sense whatsoever; he really was much too tired. Lack of sleep did strange things to one's thinking, he'd found during the last few weeks.

He managed a nod towards his teacher before finally escaping the classroom. His friends followed him, alternating between teasing him for falling asleep and coming up with increasingly far-fetched jokes about it before going on to different topics. Occasionally he'd throw half a sentence in, just to reaffirm himself that he still could, but otherwise Will kept silent. Even just the effort of walking and trying to parse his friend's conversation wore on him while the meaningless jokes and laughter of his friends filled the hallways.

Will wished they would be silent. More than anything, he wished to join their chattering, to crack jokes with Dustin and Lucas, to ask Mike if there was going to be a campaign the next weekend. Tired as he was, he didn't even notice that Mike was almost as quiet as he was himself, or how forced the jokes of Lucas and Dustin sounded.

At least, he thought to himself, *I didn't have to visit the bathroom today*. It was more than enough that the taste from this morning still lingered in his mouth; not strong, but there all the same, forever at the bottom of his awareness.

The air outside was crisp and cold, but any hopes he'd had that this might shock him awake quickly dispelled themselves; he probably wouldn't have been any more awake had someone dowsed his head into ice water. Nimble, quietly, he said goodbye to his friends, then, when they'd gone to fetch their bikes, sat down on the concrete ground, alone again.

He almost feared he'd fall asleep again (he'd welcome it), but it was much too cold for that. Still, freezing as he was, he didn't truly wake

up, either. Until three months ago being asleep or awake had been two distinct things to him; but by now he'd learned there was much more to. A sort of limbo in between the two, and that was where he was now, most of the time. When Jonathan finally appeared, Will didn't even notice him until Jonathan called his name. Inside his brother's car it was amazingly warm, and his eyes fell shut almost instantly while Jonathan took them home.

His brother's hand on his shoulder, gently shaking him, was what woke him again after they'd arrived there.

"Hey," Jonathan's voice reached him even before he'd had time to realize where he was. When he did, he turned to look towards him. "You wanna come over, sleep in my room again tonight?"

Normally Will would've resisted the offer, no matter how inviting it might be; he'd sleep much better when he knew his brother was there in the room with him, true, and should his dreams ever get too much to stand Will knew he'd be there for him, too, and he would fall back asleep in his brother's arms. But then the next morning he'd notice how, instead of him, it'd be Jonathan struggling to keep his head from falling down on his shoulders. His brother never complained about it, would stoically cook breakfast, then drive him to school and back before insisting he would go to work because they needed the money no matter how much their mother worried about them; but every time Will saw his brother like that and knew it was because of *him*, because the guy's frightened little brother was afraid to sleep alone at night ... it was hard too bear.

But right now he was too manage anything but a weak nod.

You pathetic little fag, came that voice again, *must sure suck bein' you*. Strangely, this time he agreed with it.

"Alright then," Jonathan said, before practically carrying Will out of the car and into the house. Their mother wasn't home yet, of course, so the boys (or really just Jonathan) would fix themselves something for lunch. After that, the rest of Will's day passed in a blur. He tried to do his homework, sitting next to Jonathan (who did his own) on the couch, and even got through with everything though he very much doubted the quality of anything that he'd written down. Then,

before he knew it, he woke from slumbering on his brother's shoulder, who then apologized for having to leave him alone until their mum'd come home, but he really had to get to work.

"Jonathan," he called after him, and when his brother turned round he added, "thanks, for —" Will didn't know what to say, so he gestured vaguely around himself. *Thanks for letting me fall asleep on you, maybe, or, thanks for letting me sleep in your room again.*

His brother didn't answer, but he smiled at him before leaving.

Alone again, Will tried to draw something. This time he banished the black and the gray crayons before even starting; he didn't want this one to turn out like the one this morning had done. And sure enough, when his mother came through the front door an hour later she found her son sitting in front of a piece of paper that was covered everywhere with red and yellow and a particularly bright shade of blue. It was hard to discern what exactly it was meant to represent, but ... looking at it, Will didn't feel that was why he didn't like it. No, there was something ... something else. Something so fundamentally *off* about it that he couldn't even name it, but it was there all the same. Maybe it was in the way that it seemed a little *too* colorful, a little *too* bright, like an exaggeration or a mockery of what it might've been meant to be.

"How was school, honey?" his mother asked, stepping into the room, sorting through the bag she'd brought with her, sorting the purchased foodstuffs into their drawers and cupboards.

"Okay," he answered her, "not better or worse than normal," hating that this wasn't even an outright lie and just a slight understatement. Yeah, mostly, it really *had* been a day like any other, at least if *any other* was understood to be *only days from the last three months*.

"And you've done your homework?"

"Course mum."

Closing the last drawer, his mother turned to look at what he'd drawn so far.

“Oh, wow. You doing modern art now?”

Will stopped for a moment, considering. Now that his mother had pointed it out, he supposed it *did* look vaguely like some abstract painting.

“I don’t know yet mum. Thought I’d give it a try.”

Although today he’d sleep in Jonathan’s room again, Will changed into his pajamas in his own room. That way, Jonathan wouldn’t have to see the scars adorning his little brother’s skin, or see the bloodstain on his shirt, otherwise hidden beneath his sweater.

Will wasn’t stupid; he knew they wouldn’t help, would only do more damage, but ... sometimes, any distraction at all seemed worth it, no matter the cost. If he could drown misery out with pain, then so be it. Afterwards he’d often think differently, even if in the moment itself it had seemed like the only viable option he’d had. Afterwards, he’d be ashamed of himself. *What a fucking waste you are.* Was that Troy or his father? Will didn’t know, and didn’t care, either.

Funnily, after almost a day of constantly fighting to even remotely look like he was awake, he’d started to finally get a hold of himself. He wasn’t exactly well-rested or anything even close, but right now he was *just* not tired enough to instantly fall asleep again. Somewhere in between the two, he’d found, was a place where he’d feel dead-tired but at the same time couldn’t sleep at all.

By now that had become a familiar feeling to him. More than he would’ve liked, actually.

So now he was lying on the makeshift-mattress next to Jonathan’s bed, staring at the dark ceiling above him. His brother was still in the hall, apparently on the phone with Mike’s sister Nancy, discussing something or other. For a chilling moment Will thought he’d heard the word *gate*, before then deciding that surely he’d misheard. In any case, as long as he could still hear his voice, and occasionally his mother, too, whenever she walked through the kitchen or the living room, Will felt safe. That way, he wasn’t really alone even if no one else was in the room; had he wanted to, he could’ve just stepped out

and there they'd be.

Frustrated, he tried to get to sleep. When Jonathan came in later he found his brother still lying awake, still in limbo between sleep and wakefulness.

"Alright now, Will. Goodnight."

"Night Jonathan."

It felt like hours that he spent there awake, desperately clinging to the sound of his brother's breathing to reassure himself that he was not, in fact, alone, before Will finally drifted off.

And then it didn't take long at all before he cried in terror, confused and distressed and *angry*, only slowly coming to realize that this wasn't the monster holding him, that instead his brother was there for him, holding him, consoling him.

Neither of them said a word, and neither of them had to. It wasn't the first time this had happened, after all, and certainly wouldn't be the last time, either; maybe not even the last time in this single night. But as long as Will was there in his brother's arms he felt ... well, not *safe*, he never did, but ... *safer*.

Later, they both went back to sleep, after Will had wiped his tears away.

The night wasn't over yet, after all.

Notes for the Chapter:

So I sort of wanted to write a story about Will and El. That was in the beginning of August. Since then, things have sort of spiralled out of control, the story got larger than I'd expected, and ... well. I've got about ten chapters right now, and still have to write an ending, but thought I'd start publishing this anyways. Hope I'll get this through before the 27th ... wish me luck!

Anyways, hope you enjoyed (?) it.

Gazyrlezon.

2. El

A cold burst of air greeted El when she stepped outside. It was sickeningly wet, too, and would've been accompanied by a heap of these little blue-white bad things that were always floating around, but those she pushed away, defiantly. A small cloud of them stove away from the door, leaving the air around her as clean as she could make it.

Carefully, but determined, she stepped forwards and out into the street. With time had come routine, but although El knew every crack, every bit of hideous growth, every inch of every plant-like tendril along her route she took her time. This place was many things, but she knew it was never asleep. Every time she came here again, something might well have changed. And change, here, was seldom for the better.

And she didn't want to fall prey to this place, to the monsters who dwelt here (*You're not the monster*, Mike had told her, and she repeated it to herself often, now that she lived among them). Oh, she couldn't see them; none were as large or ferocious as the original one had been (*Demagorgon*, Dustin had called that one), but walking along the broken street and towards the trees at the town's far end she knew they were there all the same.

Small ones, hushing along the sidewalks, running through unseen passageways beneath her feet. Larger ones, too, making their slow way up and down walls and gardens, leaving sparkling tracks of slime everywhere they went. She could see those clear enough, if not the creatures themselves. And of course there was also always the growth that covered everything, thick branches or tendrils that seemingly strangled the houses and trees, and even the ground itself.

And last of all, there were the floating little ones. The small, white, occasionally glowing things that filled the very air that she had to walk through. Those were the reason why she was always tired now, here; she had to push all of them out of her way, had to make sure that the air she breathed in was clean (or as clean as she could manage). Wherever she went was a little bubble of space free of the floating things, but constantly pushing those away was an arduous

task.

Wandering further along, she came by what would've been Mike's house, had she been there, not here. Sometimes when passing here she'd stop, and for a moment consider entering it (though in the end she never did). This time she walked along defiantly, not even glancing at it. After that, further out, came Will's house, and then ...

She didn't like what came next, still further out of the town, but she crossed it all the same. The house was large and covered in horrendous corrupting growth, and behind it the big wide whole (*bathtub*, her mind insisted, not helping, *it's a large bathtub*) that she ignored, and then ...

Then came Barbara, Nancy's friend whom she had failed to save. And at the same time a reminder why she had to push into the air around her with all her might, why she could not allow even a single one of the little white floating things to touch her.

Barbara, Mike's sister's friend, lay there, her remains serving as food to a particularly sickening growth; hundreds of dark, reeking strands left her body to then split up and rejoin and split up again, forming a sort of tree that was horrifying to even look at, intricate and detailed in its tale of terror.

El hurried past it. She'd seen it often enough. Now came a rotten, reeking fence that had fallen down long ago, then a pathway leading down a slight hillside. After that she was in the forest, where its thick blackness quickly swallowed up any glimmer of light that she might've imagined herself seeing flashing in the grim sky of this world.

Shuddering, El wanted to hurry (she couldn't, though, because then she would fall and her *concentration* — that was one of Dustin's words, too, and a particularly useful one — would break and then the little floating monsters would be free to get at her), hurry past the memories that this place held. Determined, she walked instead, slowly, carefully.

Here (but not *here*) she'd first met Mike, and Dustin and Lucas. Here she'd sat on the ground, eating Eggos that she'd found and taken

from that curious place with the many people in it. Not far from here she'd thrown away the hair that Mike had given her, and just a little further out she knew were the railroad tracks were, and the place where she'd thrown Lucas through the air, and later made friends with him (*Friends don't lie. I'm sorry, too.*).

Finally she could see what she'd come here for. El sat down next to the box, tired from her walk (and from keeping the monsters away), giving herself a moment of rest before opening it. And sure enough, here was her food, delivered as always, swept through from the other side (she'd once spent a night in it in hopes that it'd swap her back to the other side, too, but to her sorrow found it hadn't worked).

Eggos!

For a short and wonderful moment there was (*almost*) no room for anything else in her mind (*except for holding back the little floating things, always there, always draining*).

El thought for a long time before deciding on a course of action. There were three, this time, and a box filled with other food as well.

Then, finally, she ate half an Eggo (it pained her to stop, but she'd need the other half later), and took the rest with her. Sighing, she had no choice but to get up again, walking further along her route. It was not far from the box to the lake, after all, and she was thirsty. There, the water was black and greasy, but that was all she'd found. With her hands she formed a cup and filled that to the brim; then she concentrated.

Meticulously, she cleared it up as much as she could, and let the poisons within it solidify into a single lump of awfulness that she could throw away. Then she drank it, and repeated the process. It tasted like nothing she'd ever tasted before she'd come here, and not in a good way. The insides of her throat burned and her teeth felt raw while her tongue protested as harshly as it could to what she forced inside herself. But she was thirsty, and needed to drink, and so she drank.

When she was done she ate the half-Eggo left over from earlier, which served to numb her senses somewhat (that was why she

always ate half of it before drinking a drop; that way at least one half of it would taste *right*, and not as if she'd fished it from the lake's water). Then she refilled her water bottle, the one she'd found lying around in the hallways of her makeshift home. It had been full of rot at first, of course, and its red color had faded to a light pink after she'd cleaned it, but it was the best container for water that El had all the same.

Again she forced all of the dirt and corruption in the water into one blob and took it out. Or as much of it as she could, anyways. Only then did she get up again, to take the same way back.

When she climbed over the fallen fence again, returning into town, El reached out, concentrating on anything that felt like it didn't belong here. Sometimes things fell through from the other side; and sometimes, these things meant extra food for her, or a dry blanket. Dampness clung to everything that came from here, making El feel cold and sick. There was no such look to be had this time, though, and so she made her way back, as careful as she'd been walking in the other direction.

Again, she felt watched, observed.

Finally she reached the building where she'd set up what might be called her *home* (she herself didn't call it that, though; her home was not and never would be here, not in this place). Although it, too, was crumbling under the weight and pressure of hideous thick arms slung all around it, this was one of the few houses that were still intact in their entirety.

It was the shadow of the one her friends had called *the school*.

Opening the doors and stepping inside, El walked down the hallways towards her own room. The building around it was huge, larger than any other she'd seen except for the bad place, and her own room was at its heart. Though merely a small closet stuffed between two other, much larger rooms with lots of chairs in them it was here where she stayed, and where she felt safest (but not safe).

Through careful counting of steps, El had determined that this was the one room that was the furthest away from any exits of the

building.

Stepping inside, she placed the box with food and the two Eggos that she still had on a shelf, then placed the bottle with water on it, too. The floor beneath was covered with everything soft she'd been able to get her hands on: a few blankets stacked on top of each other that she'd taken from various houses, and above those she'd spread out the empty plastic bags that she found her Eggos in. That way, she didn't have to lie directly on the rotting wet cloth.

But no matter how it looked, a part of El already felt the prospect of sleep more than inviting. It was draining, after all, keeping her barriers up and the little flying things away. Not to mention cleaning the water, or just the walking itself. Still, she couldn't let herself fall asleep just yet. There were other things to do, first.

So El left her closet again, and began patrolling the hallways of the school. All over the town there'd sometimes be gates, but nowhere else where they were more frequent than here. In the woods, she'd feel one present maybe every third time she went there. Here, it was rare not to find one. After all, the place where she'd been thrown through and into this world was just down the hallway from where she now slept; all this had taken its toll on what in Mike's explanation had been the tightrope.

Today, she found one hidden away in a corner. Had El not felt it instinctively she'd almost certainly have missed it. From the other side, she suspected it might just look like a dirty spot that no one had cleaned in a while.

Carefully, El inspected it. The gate was just large enough for her to fit her hand through, but that was it. No way she'd fit through it, in any case.

Good. If she didn't fit through, then neither did the more dangerous things from this place.

For a moment El moved closer, her ear almost covering the gate, listening for sounds from beyond. No voices there. Satisfied, she stuck her hand through. Breaking the slimy barrier that covered the gate up was always a horrible feeling, but she thought it was worth the

feeling of nicer air on her skin.

After that, she checked the other hallways, and all the rooms she knew. Today, it was just this one gate, and that one was not a threat to anyone.

Good, she thought again. It was always a disappointment, not being able to come back, but it was a relief, too. Will would never have to worry anymore. Dustin and Lucas, for them it could remain a bad dream. *Mike ...*

Mike will be safe, she assured herself.

She'd thought about forcing the gates to open wider, of course, and had concluded that probably she could do it, too, but what would come then? El was not at all sure that she'd be able to close them again, later, and leaving a whole wide enough for her behind meant leaving an opening for horror.

So instead she stayed here. She liked to think of herself as a sort of guard for her friends, watching out for them. Not like the guards at the bad place, of course; they, El had decided, had gotten it backwards. They'd watched *in*, at everything she'd done. She looked *out*, at any potential danger.

Assured that all was right (*nothing's right*) El walked back to her closet. On the other side of the gate light had begun to fade when she'd left it; but here in this place day and night made little difference. A faint glimmer on the horizon was all she'd ever seen of any sun, here.

Once there, she sat down on her makeshift-bed of plastic bags and rotten blankets. She ate the food from the box, and one of the two Eggos left. Then, she *concentrated*.

Satisfying crashes told her that every single door in the building was flying wide open, all at the same time. Now all she had to do was to *push*, and that she did. Every single little bug, every slug and every little flying seed that'd crept inside when she hadn't been looking, all of them, she banished from the house and threw them out, feeling blood trickling down her cheeks.

Then she closed the doors again. Now she could let her guard down for a few hours, and sleep. Maybe by the time she'd wake none of the monsters had found their way back in again, or at least hadn't yet reached her closet deep in the middle of the school.

Drained, she fell onto the plastic bags, almost fainting.

Blackness came as a relief.

Tomorrow the first thing she'd do would be to peel the bloody crusts of her face, then eat the last Eggo. And after that she'd make her way out into the forest again, to the box and then the lake ...

In between was sleep. If nothing else, draining herself like that ensured she wouldn't dream, and for that she was grateful (though she never got to see Mike, she also never had nightmares, that way).

But when she woke things were different. Eerie. Threatening. *Dangerous.*

El could feel it. Sitting in the midst of plastic bags and rot, reaching for her bottle, she could feel *it*. Pounding, pounding on her mind. Pressing.

Suddenly frightened, her hand missed the bottle, and still-dirty water spilled onto the floor, where her blankets soaked it up. Something, *something* was there, just outside reach, but trying hard to get in and get closer. All around her El felt it, faint and yet present in a way like nothing else. Wherever she turned her head, she could feel it, chewing away at some unseen boundary it sought to breach. Scared, she trembled and fell. Her blanket caught her, but also greeted her with the unclean water that she'd spilled.

Shrinking, shaking, El *felt*.

Something ... some thing is trying to get in, and getting closer.

Whimpering on the floor, El was afraid.

When she left it was in a hurry, too fast even to pick up her last Eggo from the shelf. Running through the hallways, she searched for a gate as she'd never searched before, desperate. Half she expected to see a

monster or two in the hallways, but of course there weren't any. This was larger, and more powerful. Maybe if she'd stepped outside and craned her neck she'd see a few red dreadlights, if at all. Not that El did or even cared in that moment; she could *feel* it thumping, thundering away in her mind and crushing in like a hammer's blow; the feeling of dread and fear she'd otherwise only felt when they'd thrown her into the dark, black room in the bad place. Shaking, shuddering, El ran further, searching for gates.

She found one in a little room that she knew well, back from the other side. Just a little one, but that didn't matter now. She had to get *out*. El threw all her might against it, and forced it to grow.

Shaking, scared, crying, shuddering, she went through. The room beyond was empty, silent. Barely even thinking she picked up half its contents (cabinets, chairs, a heavy table, electric devices and books that might've explained what the devices did) and threw them against the gate, forming a barrier of sorts.

Her face was bleeding.

Frantically she tried to shrink the gate again, to make it go away. More blood ran down her mouth, her cheeks, her head. The gate didn't close, nor did it revert to its former size ... but she managed to force it smaller nonetheless.

Only then did she allow herself to feel relief. Before her sight went black she caught a glance of the room around her. She remembered it well; after all, she'd almost set it on fire, once. It was familiar, and almost seemed to welcome her back.

Then the world fell away, and El was asleep while blood slowly dried into a crust on her face.

Notes for the Chapter:

So, hey, chapter two's up! Basically, a lot of build-up, and me contemplating life in an evil monster world. I mean, I know no one ever really talks about it, but what did Will *eat* while he was stuck there? One week without food is a hell of a long time, and there

wasn't any Chief Hopper leaving Eggos and stuff in a box for him, and there's no way for him to clean anything, either. Guess we know where he got the snake thing, now ...

Anyways, hope you enjoyed it,

Gazyrlezon.

3. Dustin

“Hey, Lucas! How many surrealists does it take to change a light bulb?”

“I dunno?”

“Two. One to paint the room pink, and one to fill the bathtub with milk.”

Lucas gave an annoyed sigh, but Dustin got no reaction at all from Mike or Will.

“And how many mathematicians?” Dustin continued.

“Just one, who gives it to two surrealists, thereby simplifying the problem to a previously solved one.”

This time Lucas laughed, and louder than normal, but Will and Mike still stayed silent.

Dustin didn't like that at all. Sure, he'd never been the best at cracking jokes, but normally there'd be *some* kind of reaction; at the very least, he'd get a annoyed *shut up, Dustin* from one or both of them.

And it wasn't like this was a bad place for jokes; classes had just ended for the day, school was over, and tons of students ran down the hallway along with their group. Relentless chattering and laughter covered the air like a thick, pressing blanket. Everyone was relieved that school was done and they could get out; if anything, this should be the *best* place for jokes. Only it wasn't at all, at least not for them right now.

“So, Mike, is there gonna be a campaign this weekend?” Dustin tried it again. Damn, there had to be *some* kind of life in those two.

Mike sighed. “I'm working on it, Dustin, I told you,” he began, “but I don't think I'll finish it in time.” His voice was so low Dustin had to strain his ears to even hear it above the noise that the other students made.

“Next weekend, then?” he asked.

“Next weekend, yeah,” his friend agreed, obviously relieved to get out of this conversation.

“For sure?” Dustin pressed, but Mike didn’t answer. He really hoped there’d be a campaign, didn’t even matter if it was actually any good, there just needed to be *something*. Will and Mike were ... distant, he supposed. Quiet. And that was understandable, obviously, but Dustin felt it wouldn’t be right to just let them both shut themselves in, and the only thing that got them to really open up appeared to be campaigning.

And so he asked Mike every day after class if there’d be one the next weekend. He’d even tried writing one himself, but really that had turned out to be *horrible*. Like, grade-A awful horrible. And not even in any way that’d make it funny; if that’d been the case he’d have invited the others over for it in a heartbeat. He had, after a while, gotten better, except then he’d noticed he’d just been unconsciously copying both Mike and the Hobbit the whole time. Had he not stopped then Dustin would’ve gone completely *mental*, he’d never realized how much *work* Mike actually poured into these things.

Together, the four of them reached the main door. Dustin stayed behind while Lucas pushed it open, letting a sharp cold bust of air in.

“So ahm, see you tomorrow!”

“See you!” he got back, once in Lucas firm voice, two times as whisper.

“You’re not coming with us, biking home?” It was Lucas, too, who asked the question on everyone’s faces.

“Naw, Mr. Clarke said he’d have time today, to see if there’s anything useful left from his radio”

It had been months now since El’d blown that thing up (*Will didn’t even get to see it at all*), and ever since then Dustin had been going through the wreckage, cleaning up rubble from still-usable parts, sorting wires and identifying parts that still functioned. The radio

itself had been lost, of course, but it'd turned out that both the speaker and microphone still worked. During the last few weeks he'd tried building a cheap sort of megaphone from the two. Connecting them had been no trouble; it was the amplifier that was tricky part. He'd gotten a circuit diagram from the library, but he only had the parts left from the fire, and not everything he needed was there. More than once he'd had to improvise, and it was hard being sure that whatever he'd wired together wouldn't just start smoking when under power or simply burst into flames altogether. Dustin just couldn't risk blowing up the few parts he still had — sure, Mr. Clarke would probably have replacements somewhere, but that would've felt like cheating.

Still, walking through slowly emptying hallways towards the Audiovisual Room and mentally going through what was left to do and figure out, Dustin was confident he'd manage it. And Mr. Clarke had said he'd have time to look into this with him today, and that man certainly would have an idea. And generally speaking, Dustin felt that it was always better not being in that room alone, working by himself. He'd tried to get Mike to come with him, once, but nothing'd come of that (and to be sure, Mike probably wouldn't have been any help — *he didn't even know how a compass worked before I explained it to him* — but it'd been nice to have someone around all the same). He'd tried to get Will, too, but he'd said he didn't really want to see the ruins of what he'd blown up. Dustin'd told him that this was bullshit, and that if anyone'd blown the thing up it'd probably been El or even the Demagorgon, and in any case it wasn't really a big deal since they'd gotten to hear Will's voice, proving that he wasn't, you know, *dead*, but Will had insisted.

And so Dustin strolled down the hallway all by himself. By the time he reached the door no one else was around, the school empty. That was good, he realized later, or else someone might've heard him. Because when he got to the A/V room, fumbled for the keys Mr. Clarke had given him earlier and opened the door, Dustin didn't get out the copy of the circuit plan he'd drawn off the library book, nor did he start searching for parts that looked like they might still work.

Instead, he stood in the doorway, shocked, and stared. He might've yelped, too.

“*Holy Shit!*” There was simply no other way adequate of describing how he felt like. Even that one was a bit unsatisfactory, so he said it again.

“*Holy Shit!*”

It looks, he thought, it really looks almost exactly as I'd imagine it'd look if a bomb had detonated in here.

For a second he thought that maybe Troy, or one of that bully's goons ... but no, that was impossible. Only Mr. Clarke and the other teachers had a key, and they all knew better than to give Troy one. Besides, the door *had* been locked, and Dustin was pretty sure Troy'd be dumb enough *not* to do that.

Uncomprehending he stared at the mess. There lay the loudspeaker, ripped apart with some sad-looking wires struggling to connect the pieces. Its plastic hull had cracked open like an egg, with fragments and shards of it all over the floor. Not far from that he found the microphone, while the wires he'd so carefully sorted were thrown all over the place, as if someone'd taken a plate of spaghetti and covered the walls with it. Not even the *table* was where it used to be; it stood pressed to the far wall, and the two chairs that used to stand on either side of it looked like someone'd driven a tank over them.

Somehow, though he'd cleaned the whole place carefully (and that'd been *after* the actual school personal, and probably the Hawkins Lab agents as well had gone through it, he'd just picked up what they'd missed) there was blackish dust everywhere. In fact, the floor was almost completely black. The walls looked as if someone'd had a campfire in there. The smell of burned wood and electronic drifted out the door at him, two unpleasant things mixing together into an entirely new form of awful smell.

In fact it was so dirty that up until now he hadn't seen the girl lying there, because her clothes were just as black as the rest of the room.

Okay, he decided, time for a third:

“*Holy Shit!*”

Then he hurried to the girls side. No matter the color of her dress (and, in parts, skin), no matter the hair that was longer than he'd remembered it, no matter the bloody crusts over her face; there was no doubt who was lying there on the floor of the audiovisual room, unconscious or asleep.

"Eleven!"

Kneeling next to her, he tried to shake her awake. Then, in a moment of hot and pure panic, it occurred to him that he didn't know if she was even still alive, so he fell on top of her, pressing his ear to her chest. *There*, he thought, *a heartbeat. Not dead, then.* Relieved, he got back to shacking her, though this time he wasn't as rough about it.

What do I do? was quickly replaced in his mind by *How did she get here?* and *Does that mean there's a gate in this school?* and then by *Why'd she throw the furniture around*, before, all-encompassing and terrible, came *Oh shit, in a minute or two Mr. Clarke will be here and then what do I do?*

Maybe he'd be able to carry her out before he came, or hide her in one of the cabinets, but then the room would still look like it belonged to goblins with intelligence-scores of zero, and how'd he explain *that*?

At least El seemed to be waking up now.

"El! Eleven! Wake up, come on come on *come on*, wake up!"

Her whole body shook as she opened her eyes. For a moment she just stared at him, then:

"Dustin."

The barest hint of a smile seemed to show on her face, which, given all the bloody crusts on it, made her look mildly creepy. Dustin, meanwhile, had even less ideas what to do now that she was awake; he hadn't thought any further than this yet.

"Ah, hi El," he said, lacking better alternatives. Then he remembered, got up and for a moment stuck his head out the door. He couldn't see Mr. Clarke just yet, but he heard his and Mrs. Robbins's voice drifting

down the hallway; evidently they were talking just around a corner. Still, he might come into sight at any moment.

“Ah, Eleven? Listen, we can talk later about how you came back and everything, but *please*, I need you to hide, okay?”

“Hide?” Then, a moment later, “bad men?”

“No,” he said, thinking of the government’s agents and Mr. Clarke, “not bad men, but it’d still be trouble. Just hide in there, I’ll think of something, okay?” He pointed at one of the not-entirely destroyed cabinets.

For a moment El looked as if she was on the verge of saying something more, but then limited herself to a simple “okay.”

“Good. Oh, and ah, we really missed you. All of us.”

Now she *really* smiled. “Me too.”

“Okay. You’re awesome. I’ll come back in a minute.”

With that he closed the door, just as Mr. Clarke concluded the conversation he’d had with his colleague and came round the corner and into sight. Dustin took his key and locked the door, trying his best to look normal and not desperate to hide something.

“Dustin,” Mr. Clarke said as he came closer, “already done for the day?”

“Ah, yes, it — er” *what do I say?* “er, building that megaphone from the scrap parts” *okay, pointing out the obvious, that’d bought him time, now just think of something, come on Dustin, think —* “turns out building it was a lot easier than I’d thought, so, yeah, I’m pretty much done.”

Great. Mentally Dustin congratulated himself. The worst that could happen now was that he’d have to give Mr. Clark his key back, but surely El would get out of the room herself, if need be?

“Uh, great,” it was clear that Mr. Clarke was surprised, *good, that’s good, and now please just ask for your key back and then go —* “Could I

take a look at it? I think it'd make a nice project for the next science fair, you know."

— *Shit!* Why hadn't he thought of that? "Ah, ah, sure, but — " *shit what do I say now?* "— well, it should be functional now, but I don't really think it's *finished*, there's still some open parts, and, you know, parts of it run under network power, so it really shouldn't be turned on yet, or it might just give one an electrical shock."

There. That should work. Sounded ridiculous, but should work. Dimly, Dustin thought about surrealists changing light bulbs.

"And you're sure you know how to deal with that?"

"I mean, yeah. Just find duct tape and cover the whole thing with it. Should make it less prone to falling apart, too."

To stop Mr. Clarke from saying anything else (*Oh God where do I find an amplifier before he steps into that room the next time?*) Dustin fumbled for the key in his pocket (*Wait, scrap that, how am I gonna tidy the place up?*) and handed it back to his teacher (*Hopefully Eleven can open doors with her mind, or else I don't even get inside that room by myself anymore*).

"That'll make it look even more as if it's made out of scrap parts, too."

Dustin wasn't sure, but it almost seemed like Mr. Clarke was smiling at that. *Keep going*, he thought, and then mindlessly babbled the first thing to pop into his head.

"Yeah, it'll look like something E.T built in Elliott's backyard."

"Totally," Mr. Clarke agreed. *Yep, definitely smiling now. Good.* "I fear it won't do anything to impress the jury at the science fair, though."

I don't care about that, just please stop talking now and don't go into that room so I can get El out of there!

"Actually, I think there are still some heatshrinks left, let me see ..."

And at this Mr. Clarke took the key he'd just been given back and

unlocked the door.

Shit. “Mr. Clarke, don’t —” Dustin managed, but by then it was too late.

What the hell? What more was I supposed to do? This is just unfair.

For a moment there was perfect silence. Dustin kept his eyes shut, and wished evolution had fitted him with a pair of earlids to go with the eyelids, too. Because then he wouldn’t have to hear —

“Oh, *Jesus!*”

What should I do? Should he go and run away? Eleven’s still in there! Stay here? But then what do I say?

Given that his eyes were closed, he didn’t actually see what Mr. Clarke did right now, but he could still hear the man’s yelps as he stepped inside the room.

Something ruffled along the floor. Something else creaked, and then a third thing fell and shattered. Then came the characteristic *squeak* noise of the cabinet doors, closely followed by a surprised gasp of his teacher. Then an exclamation, of terror.

Only then did Dustin realize what might be going on in there.

“Eleven don’t kill him!” he screamed as he ran inside.

El lay on the improvised hospital bed inside a small chamber next to the staff room. Normally it was used in case a student got sick and had to be taken home; he himself had lain on it exactly once, just long enough for his mum to turn up. Mrs. Kingston had been next to him, offering advice on almost everything imaginable as long as it wasn’t actually helpful to Dustin, who’d lain there with a bucket full of vomit next to him. It wasn’t his most pleasant memory.

“I’m sorry Mr. Clarke, for ...” Dustin couldn’t think of anything good to say next (*for lying? Or for the mess in the A/V room? For almost letting El choke you to death?*), so instead he made some vague gestures and hoped his point got across.

Eleven, just barely awake (in fact Dustin had carried her half the way here), turned her head to look at Mr. Clarke. "I'm sorry, too."

The man in question, meanwhile, fingered his throat.

"On the bright side, you'd have been the first man in history to literally be killed with the force."

Mr. Clarke gave a halfhearted laugh at that. Sometimes Dustin really wished that the man wasn't a teacher, he'd have been fun to play DnD with otherwise.

"Sorry. But she's not normally used to adults not being a danger. And she has superpowers, so ..."

He desperately wished he could think of something better to say. Fortunately, Mr. Clarke seemed more interested in Eleven than in him.

"I ... ahm ... have we met, actually?" *What?*

"Yes," Eleven said, "Mike ... he called me Eleanor." Oh, yeah, right. Dustin had completely forgotten about that.

While they were talking, Dustin got some tissue paper, dumped one end of it in the watering can (he suspected it was usually used for the horrible flower pots in the staff room) and carefully began to clean El's skin from dust and half-dried blood. Her hands first, so she could still speak.

"So I guess you're not from Sweden, then."

El stared at him, not comprehending. It dawned on Dustin that she didn't actually know what *Sweden* meant; probably, for all she knew, it could've been another word for *secret government base*.

"Sweden's a country, El," Dustin explained, now rubbing dust off her other hand, "that is, er, a place somewhere else."

Finally she got it. "No," she answered Mr. Clarke's question.

"And not Mike's second cousin, either?"

“No.” Here she was quicker, surer. Meanwhile, Dustin realized that their cover story had actually made almost no sense at all. Why would Mike’s second cousin from Sweden go through an intercontinental flight just to visit a funeral of someone whom she’d probably never even met?

“You hungry, El?” he interrupted, having first noticed how thin her wrists were and then how the old dress hung off her body even when lying down.

“Yes.” Now *that*, that sounded like she was sure of herself.

“I’ll get you something. Mr. Clarke, is the cafeteria still open?”

“Er, I think so, yes —”

“Great, I promised El chocolate pudding!” And with that, Dustin hurried out of the room to get it. Really, that lunch lady could do whatever she wanted to, he’d accept no more excuses.

El was wolfing that shit down faster than even he would’ve ever managed, and Dustin (for all of Troy’s insults about being slightly on the fat side) usually took a certain pride in being able to out-eat any of his friends. She looked happier, now, too, and was sitting on the not-quite hospital bed instead of lying down, using the cabinet next to it as table. With lunch lady standing guard he hadn’t been able to get more than four of these cans (turned out that the woman was not just a liar; she also knew *exactly* how many friends he had), and El was already halfway through the third. Slowly, Dustin gave up his hopes on getting the fourth one.

“So, Dustin, and ... ahh, *Eleven*? What *exactly* happened to the audiovisual room?”

Oh shit. There it was. The big question. *Well, guess I should’ve expected it, really.*

And given that El was still busy stuffing herself with chocolate pudding, it was Dustin whom Mr. Clarke choose to stare at.

“Well, er ... I sort of can’t tell you, actually.”

“Why not?” Smiling (*Oh thank God he’s smiling*), Mr. Clarke added, “Classified?”

Dustin almost laughed. There was no way this would turn out an easy conversation, he’d have to fight his way through, but it was nice knowing Mr. Clarke wasn’t going to murder him for it. Obviously he had to tell the man *something*, but he still tried to limit just how much information he had to give up. And obviously there were things he himself didn’t understand, like, how El had even gotten into the A/V room in the first place. But he *had* to explain the superpowers, for one thing.

Their conversation was broken exactly once, when El, unfazed with Mr. Clarke’s disbelief through large parts of her friend’s tale, choose to forgo the metal opening strap of the last pudding can and instead just made it pop open with her mind. It gave a loud *clang*, and after that Mr. Clarke seemed to take Dustin a little more seriously.

At the end, Dustin had Mr. Clarke solemnly swear he wouldn’t tell anyone of whom he didn’t know *for certain* that they were already in the know (here he thanked the heavens that it was Mr. Clarke who’d found them, because no other teacher would’ve ever taken *that* seriously). After that, his science teacher knew of the Upside Down, why he’d called him at ten o’ clock on a Saturday to ask about sensory deprivation tanks and had probably also gathered a pretty good idea of what had *really* happened to Will during that week. He also knew to (and Dustin’d stressed that, and repeatedly) *never, ever* trust anyone from the Department of Energy, or, for that matter, anyone from any other government agency. He’d managed to keep the Demagorgon out of it, though, and everything about the Chief’s involvement.

Finally, when Dustin was finished, Mr. Clarke suggested phoning Will’s mum, since she was (to his knowledge) the other adult who knew anything. Dustin agreed, if reluctantly. Certainly, they’d have to do *something*; unlike Mike Dustin didn’t have a basement to hide her in, but calling Mike was obviously not an option, what would they say if one of his parents answered?

It took less than a minute, but watching Mr. Clarke with that telephone were some of the longest moments in Dustin’s life. He

could only hear one side of the conversation, after all, which was infuriating enough on its own; but hearing only what Mr. Clarke said, Dustin started to wonder if the man had any sense at all — not even once did he mention El, instead simply insisting Mrs. Byers should come immediately, that he thought it necessary to speak with her about her son's behavior, and in person, not over the phone.

By the time Mr. Clarke got off the line Dustin was thoroughly confused. *What the Hell was that?*

Mr. Clarke took one look at his student, and it was obvious that he'd seen the question there. Dustin knew that expression, it was the one teachers wore whenever one of their students had missed something excruciatingly obvious.

"How do telephones work, Dustin?" he asked.

Now that doesn't make anything clearer. Still, he tried to answer the question. "They record one's voice, turn it into an electromagnetic signal and send it down the cable to the other end," was the best he could come up with, unsure what exactly Mr. Clarke expected to hear.

"Good, and how exactly is that conversion done?"

Dustin thought about it. "I guess it just takes the sound waves from the microphone, and then the level of electronic power rises and falls according to the same pattern ..." *So far, so obvious; that was exactly how the burnt-out radio had worked and how he'd meant his own megaphone to work; besides, how else would it be possible to do the reverse conversion, back to — oh.*

Oh. How had he been so dense?

"... so anyone with access to the cable can just listen in," he finished his sentence.

Mr. Clarke smiled. "Full marks, as always."

Normally hearing that sentence would've made his chest swell with pride, but right now all it did was to create intensified horror. *It says "Department of Energy" right on their front door,* he thought, *obviously*

they'd know how to tap into phone lines.

Sitting in that downbeat so-called *emergency room* of his school, Dustin realized for the first time how stupid they'd actually been, talking about everything over phone and supercomms.

"In any case, Mrs. Byers has promised to come immediately."

El, her mouth still smeared with pudding, looked at them both, confused.

"She's Will's mum," Dustin told her.

"Safe?"

"Safe," he agreed, "You know her, too. The woman who helped us built the bathtub?"

El smiled. "Will?"

"He's back. Still looks ill, but he's getting better."

"Good. Mike?"

"We'll call him," he promised her. If need be, he'd just bike there and tell his friend in person; there was, after all, no telling who might be listening on the phone (or the supercomm).

Then, together, they waited for Will's mother to come by. El told them what'd happened to her, giving her best to make them understand with her still very limited vocabulary. It was a messy conversation, with her constantly searching for words, him and Mr. Clarke suggesting new ones only to then argue over exact definitions, but Dustin felt he got the general idea. Hearing how she'd survived, what sort of mud she'd been forced to drink, he suddenly felt an intense desire to vomit, though he managed to keep that down. He also wondered if her story explained where his missing stack of X-Men comics had gone to, swept into the Upside Down, but felt that asking her if there'd been a stack of comics in the Upside Down probably wasn't appropriate.

Finally Mrs. Byers came in (actually, she went right past them and

into the staff room; Mr. Clarke went to fetch her), ignored Dustin and walked right towards El, then drew her into a hug.

“You brave, *brave* girl,” Dustin could hear her whispering. “Let’s get you home, all right?”

“Home?”

“You can stay with us, if you want. Is that okay?”

“Okay.”

In Mrs. Byers car, El stared out the window.

“Dustin? Why is it so ... white?”

“That’s just snow. It’s cold, but also really fun to play around in.” His mind got dizzy imagining just how much she didn’t know, how much she must be experiencing for the first time right now.

“Snow? Like in the Snowball?”

Dustin decided not to ask why she knew what the Snowball was when she didn’t even know snow.

Notes for the Chapter:

I have to say, I didn't expect I'd have nearly as much fun diving into Dustin's mind (though I'm not sure if I haven't overblown the science part of him a bit? I mean, I have absolutely no idea what's on the curriculum in the US for his age, so I don't even know if he'd be able to understand that book about amplifiers he got from the school library (and why does the school library have such specialized books anyways?)). I possibly also overdid his obsession with chocolate pudding, but I thought it'd be nice if he got to fulfil that promise he made in episode eight ... I was always sad that El had to leave before she ever got to try that stuff ...

In any case, I hope you enjoyed reading this!

Gazyrlezon.

4. Will

Laying in his own bed and not being alone felt *strange*. This here was where Will was alone, where he'd stare at a ceiling he couldn't even glimpse in the dark of the night, determined to keep sleep at bay (*this was where he cried to himself*) for as long as he could.

Except now there was also someone else here. Someone whom he'd heard so much about but whom he'd seen only once before today. Truthfully, Will was nervous, being in the same room as the girl who'd done so much to save him (*for months he'd felt guilt over her death*).

He tried, and tried hard, to pretend that everything was the way it always was. Only, that didn't work; because what he normally did was to pretend that everything was normal, the way it'd been before. You couldn't pretend to pretend something, that just didn't work. Even when he'd been alone that'd been difficult, but now that he wasn't it'd become downright impossible. There was someone else here, and no use in pretending that there wasn't. Someone so much braver than him.

El lay on a makeshift bed made of a hard old mattress and a multitude of unused blankets, on the floor right next to his own. In fact, he'd offered her his own, and gladly so (*maybe it would've made her smile, and lessened his guilt*), but she'd declined. Rarely did she speak more than one short sentence at a time, but on that point she had insisted; the blankets, she'd said, reminded her of Mike's basement, and of the blanket fort she'd slept in during her first time in Hawkins.

So now it was up to Will to pretend that the silence covering him was the same kind of lonely, empty quiet that he was normally forced to live with. Not that it worked.

"Will?" El's voice was low, just barely a whisper. For an absurd moment Will remembered long whispered conversations during sleepovers in Mike's basement. Except then he remembered where he was, and what'd happened since then.

She's said something. Will was sweating already, and social interaction was not something he felt good at right now (*during the last three months*). *What should I say?*

"El," he finally managed. Then he stopped again.

"You ... okay?" she asked.

He replied without thinking. "Yeah. Sure." He hoped it rang true in her ears, because certainly it didn't in his (*and why should it it's more reflex than anything by now, the same answer that I always give to that question*).

For a moment silence reigned again, and Will could stare at the unseen ceiling just as he always did, willing sleep away but still hoping he'd fall asleep. He needed it, he knew but that didn't mean he *wanted* it. Contradictions had become such a fundamental part of his life by now, he didn't even notice most of them anymore. And the few times that he did it felt all *wrong*; fundamentally, nothing about his life seemed to make any sense any longer.

"No," El told him, quiet but assured, "friends don't lie."

I know, Will thought, *and I'm not a good friend for lying all the time*. He tried to avoid it (*honest he did*), but it was so ... so damned easy to just slip in a half-truth there, let out a bit of information here ...

Hey, look right up, y'all! Look at this sorry fag, can't even trust his friends with the truth!

But his friends looked so happy all the time (or at least happier than he himself did), so much so, and he didn't want to ruin their days any more than he had to. Probably they'd already gotten fed up with him; that weird guy who never even said anything anymore.

But now here was someone who'd seen right through him, and Will didn't know how to deal with that (or what to say) at all.

Friends don't lie, she'd told him. So he told her exactly that. "I ... I don't really know."

"I understand." There was a conviction in her voice that Will had

never heard before. *I know how you feel*, it seemed to say. And that, he found, was more comforting than anything else. If he'd understood it all correctly than she'd been stuck in (*that place*) the Upside Down almost since he'd been carried back out of it.

Maybe she really *did* understand.

What a nice thought that was.

Will had been drawing again when his mum'd come home this afternoon. He hadn't expected her; normally, she worked long into the evening, but Will recognized the sound of a car coming up the driveway. Maybe it was Jonathan? Either way, whichever it was, he better get that drawing out of here. Will hurried towards his room, where he stuffed the horrible thing into *that* drawer, together with all the other paintings that he couldn't stand to look at.

But he came back from his room the front door was open, and sure enough, it was his mother standing there, looking mildly out of breath, and exited. Right next to her stood Dustin, and, for some reason, Mr. Clarke, and behind them ... Will thought he could glimpse someone else standing there. For a second he believed that maybe Lucas or Mike had come as well ... but no, this wasn't either of them.

"Will?" his mother said, "There's someone whom I think you should meet."

But before anything else could happen Dustin stormed into the living room, his usual cheerful self, if not even more so (*and how Will envied him for that*), running right at him, taking his hand and dragging him away towards the second figure so hard and suddenly that Will almost fell over.

"El's back!" he screamed, "come on you've got to meet her!"

And so that was how Will had finally met the girl who'd saved him

from the Demagorgon, still in a half-rotten dress with not-quite cleaned bloodstains on her cheeks.

“Did you miss him?”

“Mike?”

“Yeah. Mike.”

A moment of consideration, then a whisper: “Yes.”

Was it weird that Will thought *I miss him, too, even now?* He hadn’t been stuck in *(there)* the Upside Down for months, after all; in fact, he saw Mike almost every day. How could he miss someone if he saw him every day?

But somehow he did. Often, he felt like he wasn’t there at all; like he was far away from them and just watching, like, as if his own field of vision was just a movie on playback, without him having any influence on it at all.

That was ridiculous, of course, even Will knew that. But ... somehow, that was what it felt like.

Will threw out one drawer after another, hurriedly searching for any clothing that might fit her. There was an old shirt (*no, that’s way too small*), here a sweater (*no, it’s got good bloodstains on it; I still don’t know how to get rid of those*), and beneath both he found more of the same. Will worked his way through all of them; he had, after all, never really organized his heap of clothing, or thrown old things out. It was

all just some drawers with stuff in them, and he normally found something that looked relatively fine and just put it on. Only seldom did he pay any attention to what that actually looked like; he didn't care overly much about how he looked, after all.

But now ... he couldn't just dress El in some shirts he'd found in a random drawer that probably hadn't been washed for *ages (or that had stains of blood on them, or of slug-slime)*. And anyways now he had something to do, something he could put his mind to, something which — unlike a certain drawing he'd hurriedly crumpled up and stuffed into his old-paintings-drawer after his mum'd come home — couldn't really turn out depressingly *wrong*. Just find some nice, clean clothes that fit a girl who was just a little taller than he was.

Finally he returned to the living room, where El was lying on the couch with his mum sitting next to her. Although currently she seemed more busy chastising Dustin than anything else.

"Dustin! Just chocolate pudding is *not* a full meal for a starving girl!"

Dustin looked mildly guilty. Mr. Clarke, standing a bit away from them, gave the distinct impression of trying to convince everyone that he hadn't been involved in anything.

"Sorry, El," he said, "But I *did* promise you chocolate pudding."

For a moment Will's mother looked like she might start screaming before apparently deciding it wasn't worth it. Sighing, she asked El if she wanted to drink anything.

Setting his stack of clothes-that-might-or-might-not-fit-El on the coffee table, Will could see her nodding. His mum got up to fetch her something, leaving a mildly panicking Dustin behind.

"Oh shit I completely forgot about drinking, earlier," he blurted out, this time actually sounding like he was apologizing, "ah ... sorry El."

"It's okay," she told him, "I liked the —" she struggled for a moment, maybe searching for the word "— the chocolate pudding." She raised one hand and touched her mouth, smearing the remains of what Will only now realized to be said pudding — well, no wonder, if Dustin'd

been feeding her, what else would he think up? — across her face. “Sticky, though.”

“Yeah,” Dustin admitted, “I’ll get you something to clean up.” And with that he was gone, too, leaving only Will sitting on the coffee table next to his stack of clothes.

Will guessed he should say something. But what did one say to the girl who’d saved one from a literal Demagorgon?

“Er, Hi El,” he began, because that was how one greeted people, wasn’t it? “I’m ... er ... It’s nice to finally meet you.”

Amazingly, she smiled (*suddenly he thought that maybe he could understand why Mike kept going on about her*).

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” she answered him. “I’m glad you’re ... home.”

“Yeah. I’m glad you’re home, too.”

And then his mum was back, a glass of water in her hand.

“I’m sorry I don’t have anything else right now, but ... if you want, I can just go buy some coke or, or something else ...”

For a moment a shadow seemed to hush over El’s face. “No,” she said. Then she took the glass and gulped it all down in one go. Somewhere in the middle of that Dustin came running back from the bathroom with a towel in hand, which he dropped right on top of Will’s clothing-stack before running off again. “I’ll go get Mike!” he called, before he vanished out the front door and was gone again.

It was strange, really; he hadn’t been so desperate to have a conversation since forever. In fact, during the last few months he generally hadn’t wanted to speak at all, and now suddenly Will was

searching for any possible way to let this one go on, if only for a little while.

But what to say? He seemed to have forgotten how to actually *speak* to people, during those last three months. Will mentally replayed the afternoon that he'd just gone through. Finally he got stuck on her reaction to his mum offering her something else to drink.

"You don't like coke?" It seemed one of the few things he could ask that wasn't somehow connected to ... well, anything that he suspected that she didn't want to talk about. He'd been *there*, after all, and he didn't want anyone asking him about it.

But her answer came quick, and surer than he'd expected. "No." No room for discussion there, obviously, for whatever reason.

But this time El didn't let the conversation die. "Eggos?"

"I mean ... not my favorite, but they're fine, I guess."

Though of course he couldn't see her face in the dark, the following silence alone was more than enough to let him know how affronted she must look.

"Okay they're great."

He could hear soft laughter, at the edge of his awareness. Surprised, he realized that at least part of it seemed to be coming from his own mouth.

"Get some ... tomorrow?"

"Yeah," he agreed, "totally. We'll totally get some tomorrow."

He was, he noticed, *actually* laughing. Not loud or anything, it was just a soft breath of air through his mouth; the sound one made when a smile hadn't yet completely turned into outright actual laughter. *A sound someone made when one was happy.*

It didn't last, of course, but it was wonderful for the few seconds that it did. Then he remembered the slugs, and the blood on his clothes and how it'd come there ...

He remembered how previous nights had been, he remembered frantically waking up, scared, bathed in his own sweating, alone.

Will barely dared to hope it would be any different, now.

Mike came running in, sweating and evidently out of breath from biking here at top speed. When he burst inside he barely stopped to get his boots off, and scattered snow all over the carpet. Parts of his skin looked like they'd almost frozen off from biking through ice-cold air at speed. For half a second he gave a surprised stare at Mr. Clarke, who still stood there, looking decidedly out of place now, but then he was at the couch, bending over El, his face a strange mix of anticipation and happiness.

"El?"

Will'd never heard his friend's voice that soft, or that hopeful.

"Mike."

After that there was no holding either of them back; Mike basically threw himself on the couch beside her, hugging her, and, Will thought, softly crying. Feeling awkward, he himself got up from where he sat at the coffee table; it didn't seem right, being so close to two people so much happier than himself.

So Will retreated, walking towards his own room. He just didn't want to intrude on them.

Only, after he'd gone half the way there was Dustin standing there, leaning against the wall. Will hadn't even noticed that he'd come back, too.

"So," his friend asked, "should we go get Lucas, too?"

"We?" *You mean, as in, both of us?*

“Yeah, ’course. I mean, I can go alone, too, but ...”

Will was suddenly close to panicking. *Should I stay*, he wondered, *or should I go?*

But that would mean ... it was cold outside, winter, everything was covered in snow, and Will hadn’t so much as *touched* his bike since, since ... well. Since he’d come back, really. Now, it was always his mum or Jonathan who brought him to places, safe, in a car. In fact, he realized he didn’t even know where his bike *was* right now.

If I go there’ll be trouble. Maybe he’d fall off his bike, maybe he’d hurt himself, and with blood on his skin out in the open ... well. But even if he didn’t, if he somehow managed to get to Lucas’s, probably his mum’d panic, and ... and ...

Will stood there, stupefied, drowning in his own thoughts. Dustin was staring at him, waiting for an answer. Will realized that he had to say something. *Anything.*

“No, I’m ... I’m pretty tired, after ...” Will gestured vaguely, hoping it got a point across (though not even he was sure of *which* point that’d be).

“That’s okay,” Dustin told him, “I’d be tired, too, I think.”

And with that he ran off. Suddenly Will was sure he’d made a mistake, suddenly he wanted to run after him, tell Dustin that he wasn’t actually all that tired, that of course he’d come and get Lucas, but ... it was too late now, he thought. He’d already said he wouldn’t come.

With no one else there, and with nothing else to do, Will leaned on the wall. *And if I stay it will be double*, he thought.

Once, he’d thought that with time he’d get used to being alone. He hadn’t, though, and it still hurt just as much as it’d ever done.

But I'm not alone now, he thought, lying in his bed with El in her heap of blankets next to it.

The rest of the day had gone by in such a rush of action that he barely even remembered it. When Lucas'd showed up he'd dragged Will back into the living room again, where his mother'd gotten Eleven another glass of water and Mike was wondering whether or not El could sleep at his house tonight, in her old blanket fort (in the end he'd conceded that she probably couldn't; at least his mum would have to know, and then like as not his dad would find out, too, and after that there was no telling what would happen), Dustin defended his taste in food against Will's mum ("It's not about what you're eating, Dustin, it's just that you can't just give her four cans of pudding when she's been barely surviving for months!" — "*But she liked it!*") while Lucas spent every available minute with Eleven, talking and joking with her (Will didn't listen; unlike his mum and Dustin they weren't shouting, and they looked happy and he didn't want to ruin that). Dustin talked about something with Mr. Clarke, and promised to help with cleaning something else.

Finally Jonathan came home from work as well to be completely baffled by what was going on in his home, though after that he'd quickly joined in; before long, he was cooking some something-or-other for all of them. Together they all had dinner.

Obviously they didn't all fit at the table, and in any case El was still lying on the couch (and Mike refused to leave her alone), so instead of anything resembling a normal dinner they all spilled out and walked around the room, a plate in hand, eating. Will stood a little off from everyone else; he didn't want to interrupt anything, after all.

"What, you're not murdering your eggs, this time?"

Jonathan's comment came unexpected, and for a moment Will didn't know what to do with it at all. *Oh, right.* He hadn't put an enormous load of salt on his portion this time, since he hadn't thrown up a slug today. Will tried to smile, forcing his mouth into a bent shape that hopefully looked happy while trying to come up with some reply. "Naw, I thought I'd try how you losers like it." There. That sounded like something the old Will might've said, he hoped.

His brother smiled right back at him, except he seemed more ... genuine ... about it. "And?"

"Doesn't compare," Will told him.

Somewhere he wished he could tell his brother the real reason. Somewhere else, he was proud that he'd managed a dialogue that made someone, let alone his brother, smile.

Finally, then, had come what in retrospect would probably turn out to be the most important event of the evening. From his chair at the table Will could see El, still resting, and next to her Mike and Lucas had been quietly discussing something for a while when Mike suddenly stood up.

"Okay, everyone, listen up" he announced, "since I think everyone who knows about El right now is still in this room, I think that probably we should discuss some things before we all go home."

"Yeah, like, where she stays, who's taking care of her, who we tell that she's here, stuff like that," Lucas supplied. Then, more serious, he added "Also how we can protect her from the government, in case they find out about her."

Jonathan took a chair and sat down next to Will, while their mum squeezed herself onto the tiny bit of space that the others had left on the couch. Mr. Clarke remained standing. Dustin, who'd been standing at the stove, scraping the last bits of scrambled eggs from the pan, turned around.

"You mean like a sort of Elrond's Council?" he asked, then grinned that patented Dustin's-about-to-attempt-a-joke smile as Lucas groaned, obviously annoyed. "Can we decide to have unlimited

chocolate pudding for El?”

“I’ll veto that,” his mum said, almost laughing, “and what’s an Elrond’s Council, anyway?”

El, only half asleep, got halfway through asking “what is ...” before falling silent again because the question had already been asked.

“The Council of Elrond,” Mr. Clarke began, “was called by Elrond Half-elven at Rivendell to decide on what to do about the Ring of Power, and it was there it was decided to create a fellowship of nine which would carry the One Ring to Mordor, where they would destroy it in the cracks of Mount Doom.” The man sounded just as if he were in class, his voice just as teacher-like as if he were talking about physics. “It’s from Lord of the Rings,” he added helpfully, when he saw that Will’s mum still didn’t understand.

“Oh,” she said.

“Yes, and can we *please* not call it that?” That was Lucas, apparently entirely unsatisfied with the direction that this was going.

“All in favor of calling it a Council of Elrond please raise your hand,” said Dustin and raised his. Mr. Clarke followed suit. Will shrugged, glad that he had a chance for social interaction that didn’t involve talking, then raised his own arm as well, prompting Jonathan and his mum to do the same. Lucas already looked exasperated, but that increased tenfold again as Mike joined them and raised his own arm as well.

“Aw, *come on*,” he sighed. Then he turned to Mike. “I thought we were allies?”

“Sorry,” was all Mike said, shrugging, but not quite managing to keep his face from breaking into a grin.

El just looked confused at all this, and honestly, Will couldn’t even blame her.

“Okay, can we now please move on to the *actually* important stuff? Like, where El lives?” Lucas was visibly annoyed now.

“Okay okay,” Dustin gave in and fell silent for a moment, which both Mike and Will’s mum used to talk.

“She could stay here,” she suggested, just as Mike said, “She could come live with me.”

Lucas stared at his friend, flabbergasted. “Ah, Mike? How’d you convince your parents? I mean, we talked about this last time, your father’d probably just call the authorities in and then what?”

“My mother wouldn’t,” Mike said, resentful, “besides, I could just hide her in the basement again ...”

“What, because that worked last time? That was for *one week!* Look, Mike, I understand you, but you can’t just *hope* that no one will ever find her.”

“I thought we were allies,” Mike said, downcast, but didn’t press the point any further.

Instead, he turned to El. “Are you okay with that? That you’re going to stay here, with Will?”

El seemed to consider that for a moment. “Okay,” she said at last.

“Okay, so everyone in favor of El living here?” That was Lucas again. Everyone raised their hands, even Mike. El slowly seemed to understand how this worked, too, and joined in as well.

“Will and I could share a room,” Jonathan offered, “then she could take the remaining one.”

For a short moment Will was afraid he’d have to say something; talking with this many people present, even if all were friends ... but he couldn’t allow Jonathan’s suggestion to move forward; he knew the toll that’d have on his brother well enough, and didn’t like that at all.

Luckily, El was faster. “Not ... alone,” was all she said.

Will opened his mouth for a moment, then struggled to force words out of it. “I can share my room with her,” he offered. For a moment

all their eyes rested on him, and Will was more than glad after they were gone again.

“Would that be okay with you, El?” His mother asked. El nodded, which looked strange, given that she still lay on her back.

After that, the council continued for a while; Will would’ve never believed just how many questions there were connected with El coming back had he not been there. But at least he could avoid talking while the others were discussing things, for the most part. Once had been enough.

Lucas asked whom they could tell about El, and suggested as few people as were at all possible, and the rest of them mostly went along with that. His mum wanted to include the Chief (shot down by Mr. Clarke and Lucas, pointing out that he’d probably be the first that the government agents would ask should they suspect anything, and that it’d be better if the man *truly* knew nothing), and Jonathan suggested to let Steve Harrington and Nancy in on everything. Steve was voted out almost immediately; not even Will was wholly sure if he knew where *that* suggestion had come from. The question of Nancy turned out to be more difficult, until finally it was decided that the decision should be Mike’s and that he’d be allowed to tell her should he ever want to do so.

Next came the question of whether or not El would be able to attend school, and though Mr. Clarke had a short conversation with her and tried to judge how much she knew the answer was obvious to anyone beforehand. El was years behind, obviously, and even with a disguise it’d be hard to explain who she was and even harder to get required documentation about previous schools and identity; and finally any new female student her age would probably inevitably attract the attention of Hawkins Lab, which was obviously to be avoided at all costs. Finally Mr. Clarke offered to come by in the afternoons to teach her best as he could (he was not, after all, an elementary school teacher), under the guise of helping to improve Will’s wavering grades.

That then lead over seamlessly into a sheer endless discussion about security in general; with Mr. Clarke and Dustin explaining why they could use neither telephone nor supercomm to talk about anything.

Finally Lucas said that, if avoidable, El shouldn't step outside the house *at all*; reminding everyone about the always-present white vans in town and that there were probably more agents hidden somewhere that weren't quite as obvious. "I mean, really," he said, "that we even got her here unnoticed was more sheer dumb luck than anything else." No one was really happy with that, but none could deny that it was true, either.

After that they settled on codes in case they ever were forced to use unsafe channels, and on how and when to set new ones (in person, as often as possible). Finally, on Lucas's initiative, they decided to meet again should anything unexpected happen, and with that their Council of Elrond dissolved itself.

Later, when most of the others were gone, Mike had helped El set up her makeshift bed next to Will's, and with that the day had been over as well.

Together they drifted off into sleep, in the troubled way they had.

More or less. Of course it wasn't that easy, of course Will still woke up just an hour later, scared, bathed in sweat and trying his hardest not to cry, for a moment alone in the darkness. Then he felt a hand reaching for his own, and held it tight. El wasn't Jonathan, of course, but she was there for him then all the same, grasping him and keeping him safe, a silent offering of support against any monsters that might come.

Troubled, but also comforted and calmer, Will drifted back into sleep.

And when later *he* was woken by *her* sobs, he held out his own hand, which she took just as he'd taken hers before. It surprised him a bit, really, but apparently El was somehow able to find support and safety in that thin, weak and shaky thing that he called his hand. Will could only wonder about how that worked, but somehow it did. El's

sobs grew quieter until finally silence fell again, and they both fell asleep once more.

The next day, of course, was in many respects still like his others; for one, today he *did* throw up a slug, and right after getting up, too; stammering an unheard apology to El as he stormed out of their now shared bedroom and threw the thing into the sink before washing it down, chocking horribly all the while.

Except that when he came back from the bathroom to desperately pretend that everything was completely normal and like it should be, he had the uncomfortable feeling that El knew that there was *something*. And while he was terrified of the idea that anyone'd ever find out, some part of him craved for her, or really for *anyone*, to know. Maybe, he thought, he should tell her ... but no.

After that, he still went to school, where he still felt ... alone. Distant.

Then later, when he was sitting in class through one lesson after another a surprised Will found that he wasn't as constantly tired as most days, either, that he wasn't always on the verge of dropping away in the middle of something. He even had enough energy to wonder what El might be doing right now, alone at home (his mum'd offered to stay home, at least for a few days, and Jonathan'd even said he'd skip school so at least his mum could work and not lose her job, but El declined both of them — after all, she *had* lived hidden in a basement for a week and been fine, and then later survived *months* of the Upside Down — a feat Will could barely believe — so she'd be fine there as well).

And maybe, he barely dared to hope, that was an improvement.

The next week or so was ... almost comfortable. No, that'd be wrong; but it was better than those before. If nothing else, he could sleep better, now.

In the afternoons, Mr. Clarke came to home-school El, and once or twice Dustin or Lucas were there, too. Mike came by much more often, though of course he mostly talked with El and not Will.

As for Will himself ... well, he'd never known just how *complicated* life was, and how non-obvious so many things he'd taken for granted all his life. For the first time in years he thought about how to properly brush one's teeth, for example, or how exactly one was supposed to hold a fork when eating. A hundred little things that he had to explain to her, from *what is that weird block next to the sink, and how does one use it to wash hands?* to *which side of this shirt should be the front?* (he just hoped she didn't see the bloodstains on his worn ones).

If nothing else, it kept him occupied, and his mind from thinking other thoughts. Dread never got so enormously overpowering again that he drove himself to add new blood to his clothes, and the number of thin white lines along his upper left arm didn't increase for the first time in months. Even the slugs seemed to give him a break; the last one he'd thrown up had been on the morrow of Tuesday, the day after she'd come back. And if that came with increased bellyache, then what?

For this week at least, things seemed to get a little better.

Notes for the Chapter:

This is something of a weird chapter, to be entirely honest. I originally didn't have this great discussion on what should happen in it ("Elrond's Council"), but thought that if they didn't talk to each other *again* it really wouldn't work at all; they've got to have learned *something* from the events during Season 1 of the show.

Also, since Mr. Clarke apparently knew everything about DnD in the show, I had a bit of fun in showing him to be just as much a nerd as the kids are ...

Oh, and I actually forgot Hopper in my original outline for this, so I built in the "whom should we trust" thing to explain why he's absent; I hope that made sense ...

In any case, hope you liked reading it,

Gazyrlezon.

5. El

El stood at the window, staring at what lay outside. *Snow*, she thought, *Dustin said that it's called snow*. It was so ... *white*. Really, that was the only way in which she could describe it. It'd seemed to appear while she'd been in *that place*, and now it just sort of lay around, covering almost everything. It was cold, too; she knew that because she'd brushed her ankle through a bit of it when they'd left the school. And Dustin had told her it was fun to play around in, but that was all El knew of it.

She had, for example, absolutely no idea what those spiky long half-transparent sticks were that hung from the roof; or what to call the icy patterns on the window itself. Those were cold, too; when she put her hand against them, it was almost glued there, frozen to the glass.

And it was *beautiful*.

El longed to go outside, just to touch it. She longed to be there, and play with her friends.

Except, of course, she couldn't. *Bad men*.

What her friends had said was right, after all. The bad men had found her the last time, with their cars (*Dustin said those were called vans?*) all around them. They'd barely escaped.

But also, it was *wrong*. So, so, horribly, *wrong!* She didn't want to stay inside all day, every day, not one bit; she wanted to go away with Will and Jonathan in the mornings. She didn't want to have to wait on Joyce for Eggos; she wanted to be *there*, and get them herself. More than anything, she wanted to go outside and see what playing in the snow was like.

Only, well, she couldn't. Anger burned in her like some screaming monster, but that didn't help her, either. There was just nothing she could do.

Staring does not make it better, she considered, and then turned away from the window. After all, she had other things to do, too.

Mr. Clarke had left her something, something to, to ... *practice*, he'd said. That was a complicated word, she'd found; as best as she understood it, it meant something like *try, and try again, and again, until you finally succeed*, except that all of that long thought was inside this one single short word. Well, maybe she'd take a while yet to succeed, but the action of trying was simple enough.

Succeeding, she thought, that was like finally being closer to her friends. And *trying*? Why, of course, that was slowly doing all those things which her friends could do with barely a thought; and Mr. Clarke's *practice* would help her to get there. And that, finally, El could understand easily.

Determined, she went to work. Sitting down at the table inside the kitchen, taking the sheet of paper that Mr. Clarke had left her (there was another word, there ... *er* ... *homework*, yes, *that's it! I remembered!*), which had numbers on it, together with signs that still seemed a little strange to her. But then, so was the fact that she even knew what they did with the numbers.

Numbers, those had been mysterious things to her, before; She herself had been one, of course, and sometimes her Papa or the bad men (who truly weren't friends at all, she now knew) would mention others, but what they were or how they worked had never been explained, and she'd never known. Now, here, she found comfort in knowing that there was some structure to them that she could understand, and that maybe one day she'd be able to make them dance over a sheet of paper the way Mr. Clarke did. And if she could do that, maybe the memories of the men in white coats wouldn't be so bad anymore.

So, then, she slowly read first one (reading, that was something else she practiced): A three, then that weird sign — *plus*, it was called, she'd learned — and then a seven. That was easy, really; she could still count that with her fingers. El wrote the answer down. *Ten*. Like eleven, that number required two smaller ones together to write it. *Easy*, she thought; she'd learned that *days* ago, and days were a long time, considering that she'd come here not even a week ago.

The next were two tens, again combined with a *plus*. Easy, too. Mr. Clarke had shown her how it wasn't important at all what the single-

numbers (*digits*? Had those been called *digits*? Yes, she thought, they must've been) on the right side were; all that she had to do was to combine the other two. Out came a two, with a zero behind it, and that one was called *twenty*. And to be *really* sure, she counted that by hand again, starting with ten and then counting another ten to that with her fingers to keep track of it. That made twenty, too, and El was now sure that what she'd gotten the first time was correct.

The third was more difficult, but that she managed as well. *Fourteen* and *eight*. Here one had to do the left ones first, and that gave twelve, and then combine that again, with the larger one of the fourteen, and that finally gave the answer. *Twenty-two*. She wrote that down as well.

There were more like this, more numbers that Mr. Clarke had given her (there'd been a word for those, she knew ... it took her a moment before she could think of it: *assignments*), and she did them all as well. Then, after she was done, El decided to try a few more. First she took three of the numbers she'd gotten before and wrote them after each other, and together they made one enormous one. Six single numbers (*digits*?), how unthinkable large! Then she did the same again with three others. A nice thing about the rule for counting two numbers at once (word for that ... *oh, yes! Addition!* Why hadn't she thought of that before? And there'd been one for *doing* it, as well; that had been *to add*. That was two whole words closer to babbling the way her friends could!) was that it worked no matter how large the numbers were, and so she now carefully, slowly but determined, combined those two, writing intermediate answers down as well so she wouldn't forget them.

It was slow work, doing this with more than one or two *digits* (she'd used a new word!), but El was determined to work her way through this, and that she did. It took her a long while, but once she had the third complete number standing there she thought it'd been entirely worth it. She wasn't even sure if it made any sense; six digits, El had no not even the faintest idea how large that must be. Much more than what she could count by hand, of course; but did numbers of such size even make *sense*?

Still, this was something that for all her life had been mysterious and even scary, part of everything in her old life but something that she'd

never understood, *ever*. There was something triumphant about not only doing something like this herself, about even being *able* to do this herself, but also about just doing it for no good reason at all. She'd done that simply because she *could*, now, and that, she felt, was more than satisfying.

And so after she'd combined the two six-digits numbers to a single one, El did the same again but with still *bigger* numbers, and then again a final time before finally getting bored with it. Thinking so much was exhausting, really (but how nice, being exhausted just from thinking, not from constant fear or the ever-lasting need to keep those little blue floating *things* away from her). She took a moment or two to rest. But not for long, no way! El did not think she'd ever tire of this new life of hers, and so it wasn't long before she turned the paper around (*upside down — don't think that, don't use those words, never use those words*). On this side it was still empty, and El decided to use it for something else. Gripping her pencil, she began to draw one line, then another, this one slightly bent.

Drawing was hard, but somehow also easy as well; She'd done it almost since she could think, after all, because there was (there *had been*, she corrected herself) nothing else to do in that blank white room in the bad place. Her Papa, *the* bad man, had even allowed her to keep one of the drawings she'd made. There was a part of her that wanted nothing more than to never draw again, never, never, *never*, because that was from *before*. But another part of her wanted to continue very much.

Now, with just a pencil and some blank paper in front of her she felt like she was almost there again, could almost see her Papa's face again, hovering in that dreaded doorway that day when he'd come and taken it all away. *Are you drawing again?* She could hear it, chasing her mind like some sneaky creature from where she'd hidden, *Do you like drawing?* That'd been the question he'd asked, and El hated more than anything that she could still remember that, could still remember every last detail of that face and its voice as he'd said it. That ... *smile*. That ... *disappointment*. Those were not fitting words to describe it, but she did not know any that would be better. Well, she didn't *need* to describe it; she had it all in her head, and that alone was more than enough. *Yes? Yes. You do like drawing. Oh,*

Eleven, I had thought you better than that. I'm disappointed in you. In her thoughts, she could still hear that voice. How slow he'd spoken, how considerate, the way he'd dragged the words out until each seemed to last half an eternity. Maybe she didn't understand everything her friends said when they popped out sentences at speed without ever pausing, but the sheer contrast to the bad man's voice alone was always reassuring in itself. *I think I'll have to take these away,* her Papa had said, and then done it, and El hadn't drawn since.

Looking back, the worst thing was how she'd hated herself for disappointing him so. How much she'd loved him for allowing her that single piece of paper that had remained in her room. How happy she'd been when he'd done that, how ... how *thankful*.

Now ... it was hard to draw, now.

No. That had been another life, but that was *over*. That'd been *then*, but this here was *now*, this here was a new life. Here, she was allowed to *keep* all of her drawings, and keep them she did. Here there were more colored pencils (*crayons*, another new word). Here, nothing would come to either mock or admire in words told with a slight smile with lies around every corner, and no, she'd *not* stop drawing because of something that some horrible man had someday somewhere else, oh no, *she would not!* There might be many things in her mind that pressed in on her, things she didn't even want to *think*, but *no way how I'm letting that stop me, so go AWAY, you evil man!*

So determined and defiant, El drew, and she drew until that now-familiar crunching sound came through the front door, announcing a car as it came closer to the house. El leaped up; Will was here, and Jonathan, too!

And as she rushed off her chair and to the door, she could already sense something else as well. *Eggos!* They'd brought her Eggos! Joyce said she ate too many of those, true, but El did not think there could ever been such a thing as too many Eggos. They'd been the first thing she'd eaten after Benny, the first thing she'd eaten in the first house that she hadn't run away from, and that alone put them above almost everything else.

Also, she thought, they sure taste good, as well!

The door opened, and Will and Jonathan stood there. “Hi El,” they both greeted, and sure enough, there was a box of Eggos in Jonathan’s hand.

Not much later she sat at the table again, though this time it was a waffle in front of her, not a piece of paper. Well, however much she’d liked the drawing, and the calculating, she thought she liked this much, *much* more. Will had gone to his own room, but Jonathan sat across from her, watching her eat. Not long and he’d have to go away again, to *work* (the concept behind that she hadn’t understood completely, yet), but he always took these few minutes to sit here with her, maybe talk a few words.

Or just to stare at her, apparently, as he did right now. Then he stood up again, and was gone for a moment.

Well, El didn’t mind, she was busy enough being happy and stuffing an Eggo into her mouth.

Then he came back, camera in hand. *Oh!* El smiled, and heard the *click* that, Jonathan’d told her, meant that he’d made a *photograph*, which she’d learned was something a little like a really good painting, except that no one’d painted it; instead, it was somehow made by the box in Jonathan’s hands. He’d shown her some of those *photographs* yesterday. He had a *lot* of those, pictures of his family, of Nancy, the girl whose dress El had once worn, of someone named *Steve* whom she didn’t know but who, Jonathan said, was nice and maybe she’d meet him one day; more photographs of the house, of the woods, even some of her other friends. There’d been one of Mike and Lucas, both smiling, and one of Mike alone that he’d given her, which she’d put in her not-quite blanket fort. They were, she thought, some of the best things she’d ever seen, life itself captured on a simple sheet of paper, like a memory in her head.

She wished she’d have had some while she’d been ... *away*, to help her remember. Sometimes, on her daily walks, she’d suddenly been terrified of forgetting, of suddenly not knowing how Mike’s face looked like or that she’d forget that Lucas had come back and apologized. It would’ve been easier, she thought now, had she had

some of those pictures with her.

And now there'd be a photograph of her, too, and with an Eggo as well!

"Sorry," Jonathan said, as if he had to apologize for something, "but you just looked so ... happy. So I thought I'd —"

But El cut his stumbled explanation short, with just a single word, because right now she was too excited to put much thought into how two or more of them would go together. "When?"

There was surprise on Jonathan's face for a moment, then dawning understanding quickly replaced by concentration. "Well, tomorrow's a Saturday, and I can't get into the school on weekends, so ... in three days, on Monday afternoon?"

Three days. And she'd only been here for six! El hoped very much that she'd be able to wait that long. Still, after that she'd have a photograph of herself, for herself, or ...

"Can you make two?" She asked, thinking of Mike. She had a picture of him, after all, so maybe he'd want one of her as well.

"Yeah, sure. Two, or, more, if you'd like?"

El considered that. What if Mike didn't want one, after all? Or if Lucas or Dustin wanted one as well? Or ... for a moment she was struck speechless, what was she supposed to do? *What do I do what do I do what do I do what* —

No!

El took a deep breath. In, slowly, yeah, like that. Now out again, also slowly. Good, that worked, she could feel herself calming down. *No need to panic*, she told herself, *no need to panic*. Sometimes she forgot that there wasn't no black room in this new life, and no one who'd try to throw her into the darkness inside of it.

"Hey? El?" Jonathan was looking at her. "You okay?"

"Yeah," she told him, and then immediately felt guilty once the word

had left her mouth. *Friends don't lie*, she admonished herself. But then, she hadn't *really* lied, had she, and besides, what would an actually true answer even *be*? No, *I just remembered something and sort of couldn't talk for a moment, sorry, shouldn't have done that?* That sounded as wrong as anything else did, even if it was maybe a little closer to how she actually felt.

But in truth that wasn't it at all. In truth, she was mostly angry at herself for even remembering that in the first place. *I won't let you stop me here, too*, she'd promised herself, but her old Papa still had a way of getting into her head again and again and again.

Embarrassed, El realized that now she'd been quiet *again*, and that Jonathan was still waiting for her to answer. He still looked at her, mild concern on his face. Why was he concerned? Why couldn't he *not* be? No, that wasn't it. Why did *she* always have to act in ways that *made* him and others look at her like that? *Why? Why can't I just be ... why can't I just be ... just be like them?* Then she wouldn't have trouble talking anymore, and wouldn't get lost in awkward silences. She'd go to school with her friends, not be alone at home most of the day. She'd be able to draw without the bad man's face hovering in her mind.

Quit that! She'd lost herself again, thinking about that.

"I ... er ... can I ask my friends? And tell you ... after," was what she finally managed to get out.

"Sure," Jonathan answered, reassuring her, "ask whoever you want, 's long as you tell me. I won't get into the darkroom till Monday anyways, so take time to think."

See? El thought at herself, *this isn't the bad place, what were you worried about?* Only things she kept in her mind. Nothing that was really there.

Not here.

El just wished that she'd remember that, for once.

Lessons with Mr. Clarke were one of the stranger things that El had encountered in this new life, so far. In some ways, he seemed almost frighteningly similar to the sort of men she'd had to endure, *before*: the way he talked, for instance, the kind of words he used and how he always carried a bag full of various papers and books that were hard or impossible to understand. Sometimes she was almost frightened.

But then, he was also as different from those evil creatures as any man could ever be. Sure, he carried those books, but he not only let her look at them but even tried to explain what they meant. Thanks to him she knew how to *add*, now. And if Dustin was around, cracking joke, then like as not Mr. Clarke would laugh along with her and her other friends. Not that he was one of them, not really; Mr. Clarke was ... different, in a way that El struggled to understand, but also somehow the same. She'd almost hurt him just after coming back, and yet he'd helped her instead of hurting her back. Her friends trusted him, and by now, El guessed she trusted him, too. He explained her things.

And lastly, in a very unexpected way, Mr. Clarke was little like *her*, too. She'd taken a while to notice and then understand that, but now that she'd seen it there was no denying it.

"Is there anything for the list, today?"

The list, that was the sheet of paper where he'd started to write down everything she did with what Dustin called her powers. This was one of these things that made him a little like those men from before except that it also wasn't. He wouldn't come back to her with demands, or ask her to do anything else. He didn't hide the list, either, he always left it in this house (El used it to practice reading; she even had favorite entries, and while *threw a van high enough to drive bikes under it in one or two seconds; blood on nose and ears, almost unconscious* came close to the top, for her nothing could ever be above *toasted an Eggo waffle without using a toaster, time unknown but result delicious enough to be gone in half a minute; no blood at all*). And most of all, he'd explained to her why he did all that, and it'd turned out to be a reason that she could understand, and understand well.

He was curious, he'd said, and he always tried to learn new things

were he could, if that was okay with her.

And of course it *was* okay with her; after all, what else was *she* doing all day? So when he'd asked her if she'd done anything, she didn't worry, she just tried to remember. *Had* she done anything? Maybe picked up her pencil with it when it'd fallen to the floor, or maybe taken that glass of water Jonathan'd given her before going off to work, when he'd told her she should at least drink a little after all the dry waffles? Had she used it to get her mess of blankets in order this morning, or maybe even just to open a door somewhere? It was hard to be sure. Here and now, where no restrictions were set on making things move without touching them El found that she used those powers a lot. Just little things, of course, because otherwise the slight dizziness in her head became annoying or would even result in blood, but even for little things it was just *useful*.

"Yes," she said finally. "I helped Will carry his bag. This morning." He'd looked pale during breakfast, even a little ill, but had still insisted he was fine with going to school.

"Let me guess ... slight dizziness, but no blood?"

El nodded. Mr. Clarke looked just as she thought she'd do, when finally understanding something new, while he wrote down the entry. Maybe, she considered, that expression was why she wasn't frightened of him; she simply knew that one too well.

"It fits?"

"Yeah, it does."

He'd explained her that, too: in all the incidents they'd written down he searched for patterns. Yesterday he'd told her that as far as he could tell, head and blood got worse not only with the size of the object that she was moving, but also with the *complexity* of her actions, which, he'd said, basically just meant that it was easier for her to move one large thing than many small ones. And of course she'd been aware of that before, on some level, but she'd also never thought much about it. In a way she guessed she'd do just as fine without knowing that, but in another it was like gaining a little bit of understanding about herself.

“Shall we switch roles again, then? I teach you, instead of you me?”

El nodded.

“Okay. You did your assignments?”

Of course El had.

With her lessons done for the day, she sat down on the couch next to Will, whose eyes were glued to a book again, slowly moving back and forth. Another strange thing, here, something else that had been new to her at first: Reading wasn't always something done with a clipboard in a white coat; Will apparently just did it because he liked it. Something to distract, something different to think about.

And she guessed that if she was him, then ... well, then she'd very much like something to take her thoughts someplace else, too. Will was ... hurt, maybe, or ... El did not know how to put it into words, but she saw it sitting there, inside of him, clear as anything else. Just underneath the skin of his stomach, there sat a ... a *something*, and El didn't have the faintest idea what it was. She felt the reek of the Upside Down about it, in a way, but besides that ... El did not know. She didn't like not knowing, especially now, when she learned so many new things every single day, had even thought to just ask Will what it was, if it was a remnant from his time ... *away*. She thought it must be; after all, Will couldn't move things without touching them, and probably hadn't been able to keep all the little floating monsters away the way she'd done, at all times. He couldn't just blast an entire building free of them, make it safe (well, *safer*) to sleep in at night. But in the end she'd never asked, and she wouldn't ask now, either. She herself had her Papa floating through her thoughts all the time without ever being reminded of it; and sometimes the Demagorgon or the long walks through a rotten forest appeared in her dreams, and that was without someone reminding her of it.

And she knew that Will had trouble with it all, too; they shared a room, after all, and he woke up at night just as much as she did. None of them ever spoke about it, though; neither wanted to remind anyone of anything.

So she didn't ask. And in any case, she reasoned, if she saw it so easily then surely Joyce and Jonathan did, too, and they'd probably know better what Will might need. And now, sitting next to him on this incredibly comfortable contraption that was called a *couch* (El was still amazed at how soft it felt, just sitting down here) she could not care less about whatever thing might be inside Will. The way she saw it, Will was her friend, and that was all.

Except ... she was not sure how much he was actually reading. He hadn't turned a page in ages, and his eyes were far from the simple effortlessness she'd seen in Mike's or Mr. Clarke's. His speed at reading was closer to her own than to theirs.

She snuggled closer to him, trying to see what was written in the book. For a moment she could feel him tense, his whole body withdrawing in a passive state of uneasiness. That was alright, she could understand that, would've probably acted the same had their roles been reversed. Only slowly did he relax again, even drew himself a little closer to her and put the book somewhere halfway between them so she could see the pages, too.

"You want to read?"

El nodded vigorously. Will turned a bulk of pages around, so that she could start at the beginning.

"In a," she began; those first two words were easy, "holé?" now what was that?

"Hole," Will said, "the *e* isn't spoken."

Then why is it there? Reading sometimes (often) made no sense, El knew that, but it still annoyed her every time.

"in the," she continued, "gro-und?" — "ground," Will corrected, "dunno why, but *O* and *U* make something like an *au*-sound" — "ground," El repeated, slightly resentful now, "there" — okay, so this *e* probably wasn't spoken, either, for whatever reason — "livéd, err lived" — *why are there any Es at all?* — "a hobbit."

El thought for a moment. Had she heard the word *hobbit* somewhere

before? She thought that maybe Mike or Dustin had said it once ... not that she had any idea what it meant. Well, no matter. Triumph and satisfaction at having made it through the first sentence defeated any confusion. For a moment El leaned back. Why did reading have to be so ... so *confused*?

Will continued on for her: “Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell,” — El tried not to think of where she’d hid — “nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort.”

On the last few words Will’s voice trailed off, becoming lower before he finally fell silent, but El felt that it wasn’t because she should read the next sentence again.

“You know, I ... I never thanked you.” At that his voice broke itself again, and Will fell silent for a moment. El was confused, and Will hurried to continue.

“I ... I hadn’t expected anyone to come, by then. When you found me, I mean. In ... in the Upside Down, remember,” he clarified, looking at her.

And oh, yes, El *did* remember. She’d been floating in the bathtub, then, had just found the rotten remains of what had once been Barb, Nancy’s friend.

“Before you came, I was just ... I was just waiting.” There was no need for him to tell her what he’d been waiting for. For the end. For death to come, in one form or another.

“Had the monster come then ... I’m not sure if I would’ve run away. But after, I had ... I had hope. Not much, but ... just a little.” Her friend’s voice was barely a whisper now, but El could understand him well enough. “They say I came back, you know? But I didn’t. They *brought* me back. And if you hadn’t been there ... maybe I wouldn’t have been there, not any longer.” There was a long pause. “Anyways ... I just wanted to thank you for coming, for telling me that my mum was coming.”

What followed was a silence, one of the quietly unsure kind while neither of them seemed sure what should come next. El thought she should probably say something, but *anytime* (which was, as she'd learned, a normal response to a *thank you*) didn't feel right, as if she expected that it might happen again.

Again.

There was something there, something that she hadn't thought about in a while, something important that she'd hidden even from herself ...

It struck her like thunder, like a fundamental shake in the fabric of her entire world. And in a way that was exactly what this was, and that made it worse. Memory rushed in on her like the blackness once had in the bathtub of the bad place, crushing her every thought underneath it and leaving a trail of terror behind.

The monster.

She'd told herself that she'd been hiding, there in the Upside Down. But while there ... while there she'd thought she was *guarding* her friends, protecting them from what might come. Only when something had come, she'd run away ...

Somehow she'd kept herself from remembering it, that huge overpowering, all-defining presence that had woken her the day she'd come back. The hard, merciless feeling of cosmic insignificance that had made her break all the carefully thought-out rules she'd made for herself in the months before.

The monster.

It had come and pressed in on what they called *the Upside Down*, and driven her to open a gate to flee, had forced her to abandon the post she'd taken up. She'd thought that she was guarding her friends, keeping them safe, but the feeling of her head exploding had showed her how little she could actually do.

The monster.

It had gripped her mind and sucked it in, had bent and broken her

determination and spit her out again, full of fear and terror. It had left her scrambling for an escape, and made her run as she'd never run before or since.

The monster.

She'd felt it pressing in on the Upside Down. Had it breached it yet? Had it *reached* it, chewed it up and left it dead and dying, silent forevermore, devoid even of other creatures?

The monster.

Had it eaten its full, or had it decided to move on?

The monster.

And if so, then where would it go?

Where would it go?

Where?

When El remembered that there was a world outside her own terror, she found herself still sitting next to Will, crying, screaming, sobbing, her face hidden behind her arms and her legs drawn close to her body.

And then Will was there, his arms around her, holding her, steadying her, gripping her tight. El clung to him as she cried.

It was a long time before he spoke.

"Are you okay?" From anyone else that question would've been a hated litany, but not from him. Will knew how that place felt.

"No," she admitted, and hated that word with her entire being, but friends didn't lie.

She hadn't thought it possible, but Will's arms didn't draw back, quite the opposite; if anything, they held her closer.

"No," he agreed, "I'm not, either. But maybe we'll get better. Just

don't give up hope, okay."

"Okay," she told him, clinging to his words as much as to his arms.

After a while, El was able to move her arms away from her face, and hug him in turn. Or maybe *hugging* wasn't the right word for this; it was more that they held each other safe than just snuggling for comfort.

At last El was able to think more normally again.

"Thank you, too," she said. "For the hope."

Will smiled weakly.

Should I tell him? El wondered, *about the monster?* It might well be on its way here. *Here*, where she'd thought she'd be safe.

No, she decided finally. Will already had enough to deal with. And in any case, she didn't think she'd be able to talk about it even if she wanted to.

Memory was still too crisp, and too powerful as well.

So El told him nothing, and tried hard not to worry about that.

Notes for the Chapter:

This got a bit longer than expected ... I actually just meant it as a filler chapter, setting up some things for the next one, but it sort of grew beyond that. Had a bit of fun imagining El learning to calculate, and using it as a sort of coping mechanism for what she's been forced to live through (also enjoyed making fun of English orthography; I hope the diacritics I used are understandable). Oh, and obviously Will is reading *The Hobbit* to cope.

Hope you enjoyed the read; comments and suggestions are welcome!

(also I hope I won't get too caught up in watching

and rewatching that Stranger Things 2 trailer to
continue this ...)

Gazyrlezon.

6. Lucas

El seemed hesitant, eyeing the unknown object that Lucas held in his hands with caution. She sat next to him on the couch in Will's house, with Will (complete with copy of *the Hobbit*) to her other side.

"That's just my pair of binoculars," he told her, hoping his voice got the *it's nothing to be afraid of* across as well.

"Binoculars?" El said it slowly, carefully pronouncing each vowel and each consonant, apparently still unsure on how they fit together.

"Yeah. Binoculars. You look through them, and it makes things far away seem larger. As if they were closer to you."

"Binoculars," she said it again, faster and with more confidence than before.

"Look," he told her, stood up from the couch and walked over to the window in Will's living room, "if you hold it like this" — he put them in front of his eyes — "you can almost think you're outside, in the forest."

El followed him, leaving Will to his book. "Here," he said, handing them over to her, "just hold it like —" but there was no need to explain any further; El held the thing just as it should be.

"Wow," she breathed, softly. "It's all so ... close. So ... real."

"Yeah, exactly."

Intently, El stared outside, her gaze slowly sweeping over Will's snow-covered backyard, the garden shed there, then the fence behind it and finally the forest beyond, and then back again.

"What is ... this?" she finally asked, the binoculars fixed on one particular patch of the ground. Lucas squinted. The snow there was broken by something, some black patch that he couldn't make out just with his eyes, so he asked El for the binoculars. With them, it was easy to see.

“Oh. That’s ... actually, it looks like it might be part of a bike.”

In fact, it might be Will’s bike, almost completely covered by the snow. After all, Will hadn’t been using it lately (nor in the last three months, for that matter).

Resurfacing from his thoughts, Lucas found El had already taken the binoculars from his hands again, looking outside at that world which she couldn’t visit in any other way. Lucas was glad to see that she was smiling.

At first he hadn’t known what he could do with her. She was part of their groups of friends now, living in Will’s house; there was no way how he could’ve ignored her even if he’d wanted that. Only, he hadn’t been her friend for longer than half a day before she’d vanished; and not very many hours earlier he’d loudly accused her of being a traitor. The thing was that, put simply, he didn’t actually *know* her very well. So in the end he’d simply packed his binoculars, because that was what he did when he’d nothing else to do; looking outside his window, searching. For birds, mostly, but in the last three months (and especially so in the last few days) for white vans with blue letters on them that read HAWKINS ENERGY AND LIGHT.

Looking at her now, happy that at least she got to have a view on world outside, Lucas knew it had been the right choice. El couldn’t go outside, after all; as he’d said the others on Dustin’s stupidly-named “Council of Elrond”, it was just too likely that she’d be seen. But at least now she could see what was outside the window in a little more detail.

And from how she looked, El was overjoyed just to watch. Again and again Lucas tried to imagine what it must be like for her, but he always failed. Outside the window the lowering sun, tired and almost gloomy, shone its way through the treetops and canopy of the forest on the roof of the garden shed, broke itself on the bright white snow there before finally lighting the ground of the backyard, also white but not nearly as untouched; tracks of people going here and there littered it all over. In a way it was beautiful, Lucas supposed, but nothing very distinct or special, either. It was just some kid’s backyard in winter.

Except El stared at it all in such wonder that he couldn't help but wonder if she'd ever seen anything like it before. He knew little about where she'd lived before stepping into their lives, but he wouldn't be surprised if she really hadn't. And Lucas just couldn't imagine that. It was such an ordinary sight to him that he couldn't imagine how it must be like for her, seeing that for the first time in her life.

So he let her have her time. Here gaze moved all the time, back and forth, first here than there; and occasionally she'd set the binoculars aside as if to see where the one small part fitted into the whole.

"What's this?" she finally asked again. Since she was just looking into the general direction of the garden shed it took him a while to figure out that she meant the icicles hanging from its roof. He did his best, explaining to her what they were (he wasn't Dustin, who might've known how and why they existed, so his explanation mostly confided itself to *they're made of ice, and you can break them off and lick them like ice cream*; too later he remembered that El had no idea what ice cream was and then he had to explain that, too).

Finally she set the binoculars down again. "They're ... pretty good," she told him. "Thank you."

"Yeah," he agreed, not knowing what to say, "they're good enough, I used them to search for any signs of Will inside of ..."

Oh.

Shit.

He'd brought up *that* again. That time when he'd deserted the rest of the party, when he'd been searching all on his own, without any hope for success.

El looked at him, obviously confused. Only slowly did Lucas realized that she didn't know why he'd stopped talking.

"Lucas?" she prompted him, carefully, as if afraid she'd do something wrong.

"Listen, El," he began, but then stopped, unsure how to continue for a moment. But she waited for him, patiently, attentive in that quiet

way she had. Finally he continued, "I know I already said I was sorry, but ... you remember that day, when I said you were a traitor?" (*of course she remembers*) "I was wrong. And I ... I deserted the party, even if Mike was the one who'd started shouting. I just ... I wish I'd come around sooner. I wish we'd have been friends for longer than just a few hours."

For some incredibly long moments silence reigned between them. Lucas half feared she hadn't understood him; hadn't been able to follow the flood of words he'd just poured out above her. After all, he didn't actually know exactly how much she could talk, or understand other people talking. Another thing he'd missed to learn, in that week three months before ...

But then she did answer. "You were wrong," she said, and for one single crushing moment Lucas thought that this was it, that theirs was a friendship so fucked up that it was gone well and truly and forever now before he noticed that she wasn't telling him off, that instead she'd merely stopped a moment and was searching for words. "but ... I was wrong, too. I hurt you. And I ... was not ... telling you ... all of you ... everything ... that I should have."

Another moment of silence. In some weird way, Lucas felt almost proud of her. That'd been the longest sentence he'd heard her say, ever.

El looked uncomfortable, her face tense, regretful, almost painful. She might struggle with words, true, but if one looked at her face there was a wealth of expression there that he'd never seen with anyone else.

"*am* not telling you everything," she amended, then stopped for a moment as if giving Lucas a chance to burst out courses at her (he didn't do that. He'd done that once, and that'd been more than enough). "But friends tell the truth. Lucas ... I was afraid, with the Demagorgon. And ... I am still, now. There is ... there is something."

There was a perfect moment of complete silence then, only broken by Will as he turned a page in his book, but that did not matter at all. It was deafening, like the low noise that came after a lightning stroke and before the thunder had time to hit home. It was heavy, in that

for a moment neither of them could've broken it and if it were to save their lives. It was dangerous, too, like the feeling one got the second before, say, touching a live wire. Most of all, it was a hammer blow straight into Lucas's stomach, and, he supposed, into his mind as well. Anything Lucas might've wanted to say was knocked flat onto its back and out his head along with any other thoughts he might've had.

All he could do was wait for the inevitable, staring at it but unable to turn away.

"Some *thing* on the other side."

A weak whisper was all that Lucas managed in reply. "Another Demogorgon?"

But of course he already knew the answer. "No," was all El said.

He sighed, the heavy-handed sigh of someone realizing that this was really happening, and that it was inevitable. "Better or worse?"

"Worse," El said, "much worse."

"And it's there? In the Upside Down?"

For the first time, El hesitated, considering. "Yes," she said, finally, but immediately followed up with "no. It's ... more ... away?"

"Further *out*?" Lucas suggested. He had no idea what that might mean, but he couldn't make any other sense of what she'd said.

"Yes," El said, surer now, "*further out*. Like the Upside Down, but ... different. Elsewhere, but connected, too. And it's coming. Coming here."

"Are you sure?"

There was only one possible answer to that, of course, but Lucas still hoped ... he didn't know what he was hoping for, actually. In any case, El's "Yes" was as crushing as a three-year famine, and any hopes he might've held quickly withered and died away beneath it.

“I came back, because I was afraid. I wanted to ... protect, but ... I was afraid.”

And at this she finally broke down into tears, her face a mask of fear and terror and the feeling of failure (Lucas knew it well), her arms shacking, even her feet becoming unsteady and wavering. Lucas didn't know what to do, but he caught her before she had a chance to fall over. Slowly, he guided her over to the couch, so she could sit down next to Will. In his own mind he could hear low screeches of panic. What was he supposed to do with her now? He barely knew her, and yet here she was, sobbing on his shoulder. He couldn't stop himself from thinking that it really should be Mike in this position; Mike knew her so much better than he did, and she actually *trusted* him, too ...

... except, just now, she'd told him something so horrible she'd been afraid to tell anyone for days, so maybe he wasn't as bad a friend as he'd thought. Still, he felt inadequate all the same. Besides the two of them only Will was in the room, and Lucas desperately hoped he'd know what to do.

So he led her over to him, let her sit down there next to him, and Will, who hadn't done as much as peaked beyond his battered old edition of *The Hobbit* all day let her fall into his arms. Lucas felt intently out of place, and at the same time searched desperately for something good to say.

The best he could come up with was “It's okay, El, it's okay,” so he whispered that while sitting down next to her, madly hoping that she'd find some solace in these simple words, no matter how little truth they had. *Friends don't lie*, he thought, and felt guilty all over again.

Together the three of them sat on the couch, arms interlocked, waiting for some relief that wouldn't come. But Will whispered things into El's ear, and slowly she calmed down again, at least a little. And again Lucas would've felt desperately like an intruder, except that both of them had gripped his hands and arms in a way that seemed to scream *don't go now, don't leave us alone*, and so he stayed. He didn't feel safe on bit, but if they found safety in holding him, then that was alright.

“So is there anything that we can actually *do* about it?”

Dustin’s question seemed to float in the room, begging an answer. Their “Council of Elrond” might not have been in full attendance (Mr. Clarke was missing; they’d called him, of course, but the man was a teacher before anything else and surprised no one when he didn’t call off his additional support class for the lower-grading students), but there sure were enough people in the room to make the lack of a reply seem intently *wrong*.

Still, no one said a word. Not Jonathan or his mother, who sat on chairs they’d borrowed from the dinner table, nor Will or Mike. El herself, sitting between them on the much too small couch, didn’t utter a word, either. Lucas, who was squeezed in next to Mike, wouldn’t say the answer either. The Byers’ little living room might have been packed with people, and Lucas very much suspected that they all had the same words in their minds, the same answer to Dustin’s question, but no one ever made a sound. Even the question itself, as obvious as it had been, could only have been asked by Dustin, who had this weird way of detaching himself from the situation around him whenever he was thinking. Or at least, that was how Lucas thought about it; Dustin would stop participating in whatever topic was currently at hand, thinking his own thing, and then suddenly burst in with something like *I need your compasses*. This time, the question might’ve been obvious, true, but it had still taken him to say it, because no one else could even really admit that they’d thought about that.

Well, Lucas supposed that *someone* had to give an answer, or else the whole operation would just grind to a halt right here and now. In a group of soldiers — and that was how he thought of their gatherings, their “Elrond’s Council”, as a group of soldiers set on protecting El as much as the real Council had been set on dealing with the One Ring — not everyone could always just state the comfortable or convenient.

“No,” he spoke to them, “nothing that we’d know of.” There was a sort of low-key sigh across the room, not of surprise but of relief, because now someone’d said it out loud, now everyone knew for sure and no one else had to go out and admit it. Then everyone forgot

social difficulties again, and suddenly the temperature dropped. Fear, and even despair, seemed to fill the room.

Luckily, Dustin came to save them. “Well is there any way we could find one? Get more knowledge about it?” He made a brave show of defying the general atmosphere of hopelessness, almost managing to sound like his normal brazen, curious and slightly annoying self. Even Lucas was almost fooled, and Lucas knew maybe better than anyone else in this room (*this Council*) how Dustin sounded when he play-acted. They’d been teasing each other since forever, after all.

Still, fake hopefulness or not, it’d done the trick. Now everyone was thinking again, and concentrating on that too hard to be deeply afraid. Even Lucas, who’d thought about everything as thoroughly as he could before even calling this meeting found himself going through the possibilities again. And even when he knew that he’d come up empty again, well, then at least the distraction was a welcome one.

But it was Mike who spoke next, not him. “El? You said that there might still be gates open?”

Now Lucas found himself dumbfounded. He seriously had no idea what Mike had thought of, or how it would help anybody. And for that matter, neither had anyone else. Dustin looked mildly interested, but the rest either stared in puzzlement, or, in Jonathan’s case, with mild uneasiness. Mrs. Byers looked as lost as if Mike had asked if Frodo had been right in his handling of Gollum.

“Yes,” El confirmed.

“If you ... well if you got closer to one of them, is there a chance you could find out more?”

Lucas almost thought Mike’d gone mad, or come down with a bad case of premature Alzheimer’s disease. *Have you missed the part where she’s literally lived behind those gates for weeks?* He almost wanted to scream. Only then did it hit him, why Mike had come up with this particular question. And though El seemed to honestly consider the idea, Lucas cut any potential answer short.

“No, Mike. El can’t go outside. It’s too dangerous.” *I know what you’re trying to do*, he thought, *and I can’t even blame you for it.*

For a moment their meeting hang in silence, until Mike burst out. “Lucas, if you haven’t noticed, she’s been in this house for *weeks* now!” Mike was almost screaming, now. “She’s basically a prisoner, and we’re just helping with keeping the door locked! She needs —”

“*I know*, Mike,” Lucas cut him off. *I want her to go outside, too*, he thought, when he’d seen how longingly she’d stared outside the window. *Especially* after this afternoon. He wanted to go outside with her, take her to all the spots along the lake and the cliff edge where one could watch out for birds, and maybe even to that old quarry where he’d practiced with his wrist rocket ... Hell, even just the arcade or even Mike’s basement with its DnD table would do. “But it’s not *safe*.”

El looked between them, first at Lucas, questioning, and when his stare wouldn’t give any ground she turned to Mike, staring him down in turn. “Bad men,” was all she said, though with a sadness that only she could’ve packed into two such simple words. And now Mrs. Byers, too, spoke up for the first time today. “I won’t allow anything to happen if I’m not sure that it’s safe.”

Mike, though, would see no reason. “El,” he said, staying calm only with visible effort, “the bad men probably won’t even recognize you. I mean, just look at you! You hair’s longer, you’re wearing Will’s clothes, not one of them would ever know you!”

El looked uncertain now, and even her almost-mother looked like she was starting to think. *No!* Lucas was desperate, *No! If she goes outside and they do know her, which they probably will, then, then ...* Failing her once had been enough, he thought. Determined as he was, he’d do his best to keep her safe.

“Mike?”

“*What?*” Had Mike murdered him then and there, Lucas wouldn’t have been surprised. Worse, he’d have *understood*.

Lucas checked for his binoculars (they were still dangling around his

neck), then for Will's supercomm, which lay on the coffee table. Lucas turned it on.

"Could you just come outside for a moment?"

"*What?*"

"Maybe you too, Dustin." He'd have added Will to the list, but with how pale he still looked ... "I want to show you why it isn't safe."

With that he stood up, grabbed his jacket and Will's supercomm and went outside through the back door, where he grabbed his own one from his bike. The cold bit deep into his bones, but he figured he'd just have to deal with that. A soldier didn't just stop being a soldier just from a little cold, after all, no sir! He did what was *right*, and in this case it was getting Mike to see reason. Finally Dustin and Mike stepped outside as well, both in jackets.

"Well?" Mike demanded, "Why are we here?" That sounded so much like something that Lucas had once said, he almost winced.

"Here," he said, thrusting Will's supercomm at them, "take this. Close your eyes, count to one hundred, then ... I dunno, just do whatever you want, as long as you're still outside. Throw snowballs at each other, or something."

Mike stared at him in disbelief, but Dustin had already closed his eyes and begun counting, and loudly so. "One. Two. Three. Four." Grudgingly, Mike joined him.

Great. Now he just had to be as good as he thought he was, or else this wouldn't work. Now that would be a fuck-up of truly awesome proportions. As quick as he could in the deep snow, Lucas ran off. First towards the house, beneath the roof into the slim stretch of bare ground not covered by snow, so his tracks would end there. Halfway around the house. Then off again, towards the garden shed, but backwards, hopefully creating tracks that made no sense. Now walk along the shed, then the fence. Finally past that as well and into the forest. He was careful to step over as many other, older tracks in the snow as he possibly could.

Back from the house, he could hear that Dustin had just reached forty.

Beneath the trees there was less snow, and his boots left almost no traces to speak of. Now just find a tree that looked likely and climb that. Lucas found that this was the hardest part; he'd never climbed a tree in winter before; and now that he did it made his hands almost freeze off and more than once he almost slipped and fell down again. Still, somehow he managed to get up with both binoculars and supercomm intact.

By the time Dustin and Mike had reached a hundred, Lucas had taken up residence, so to speak. From their position he'd probably still be noticeable if they knew where to look, but he hoped they wouldn't. Luckily, both his jacket and pants were a nondescript gray that seemed to blend in nicely with snow-covered branches devoid of leaves.

What came next felt almost natural too him. Just a few months ago he'd been in another tree, looking out at Hawkins Lab, and since then he must've been watching for birds (and white vans) at least a dozen times. Through the binoculars, he could see his friends standing in front of the Byers' backdoor quite clearly, almost as if he'd stood next to them, not far away enough that they were only little nondescript figures. Right now they were stuck in the certain awkwardness that came with not knowing what to do; playing on command never really worked.

At last, though, Dustin sneaked a little further out, forming a snowball just when Mike wasn't looking. Lucas pressed SPEAK on his supercomm.

"Careful, Mike, incoming snowball, behind you!"

Too late, though; Dustin had already hit him squarely in the back. What came next was a perfect display of surprise and uneasiness. If this hadn't been so deadly serious, Lucas would've almost felt triumphant.

"Dustin, you're going towards Will's supercomm, Mike, you're hesitating, ah, Dustin now you're too, Mike, you're looking scared or

confused, can't say, Dustin, you're walking again, wait, watch out! —" Too late again, Mike had already gotten his revenge and placed a snowball of his own on Dustin — "Ahh, I think you wanted to speak to to me on the supercomm, except now you're busy forming snowballs as well ..."

Lucas went on like this for a while, describing their every action while Dustin and Mike slowly spiraled into a proper snowball fight, to which Lucas even provided a hit count; "Mike five hits, Dustin four," he'd announce, and "Sorry Mike, but that looked like a miss," and so on.

He gave them both six hits before deciding that this must be enough, and climbing back down (this was even harder than climbing up had been; his fingers were frozen stiff, as were his legs, and half the time he couldn't see where he was going), coming to meet them in the backyard. And then, for the first time, he considered that something (someone) might've been watching *him* as well, which gave him the creeps and made him shiver even more than he already did.

"How much did I get right?" he asked them.

"Where the Hell *were* you?" was what he got in place of an answer. He showed them, and then pointed out that all he had was a cheap hobby-pair of binoculars, not even close to what the government guys would have on their hands. Quickly, whatever spark of hope had remained in Mike's eyes turned into outright fear as he saw the distance Lucas had been away.

It broke his heart, but when they went back inside, Lucas was almost happy that El stepping even a single toe outside was now about as likely as Gandalf staying dead.

And that, he reflected, was also a singularly awful thing to feel, too.

But it just wasn't *safe*.

Notes for the Chapter:

Oh boy, but Lucas is hard to write. Possibly because he's the least like me, or like any normal looser/nerd

trope. And I just never understood some people's fascination for military stuff ... (I also instinctively distrust anyone who's got a national flag in their room, but then I'm not from the USA, and it appears few countries share the US's enthusiasm for their flag ...)

In any case, I hope I did him justice. Too often fandom seems to either mistreat or ignore him entirely, sadly ... a shame, really; he's the most practical of the four boys, I'd say, and also the most loyal. Possibly also the most badass as well.

Hope you enjoyed reading, comments are welcome!

Gazyrlezon.

7. Will

One surprising fact of life that he'd learned, Will reflected, was that, no matter how impossible it seemed for things to get worse, things *could* always still get worse, and generally *would* get worse. Hitting rock bottom was a fancy idea, almost a nice one; how comforting to think that there was some level that, once reached, at least kept one from falling further down your own personal cosmic waste-spiral. But it just wasn't true; maybe there were rocks somewhere, but if so then they were pointy needles that'd first impale him and then stick in his flesh, later, when he'd fall down further.

The weird thing about it all was rather that Will continually forgot it again. When his father'd beaten him he'd thought that nothing could possibly be any worse. Then, on the first day of school, when Troy had called him a *fag* for the first time, crushing his hopes of finally making friends somewhere else, and if that wasn't bleak then he hadn't known what was. Only then that same bully'd thrown him on the rocky ground during recess, and that'd been even worse; but surely there was now way to fall farther?

Of course there'd been.

Next step had been coming home covered all in pink glitter, '*cause the fag should look like fag!* Maybe he hadn't been bleeding that time, but it sure as hell didn't make it any better. And although by then Will was almost used to the occasional beating from his father, and getting glimpses of blue spots on his mother's skin, it'd become worse when his father joined in with his bullies from school, hurling the same words at him that Troy used.

Then, of course, had come the demagorgon, and suddenly it felt like a trapdoor had opened beneath him into a whole *new* world of being hurt and alone. But even then, at least he'd been in some version of his home, even if it'd been overgrown with slimy, wormy branches of some nameless creature and filled with the dampened screams of other monsters from beyond. There'd been ways further down, of course; he should've known it, really, but still he hadn't. The Demagorgon had come again and chased him out into the woods, and now *that* had been a scary place if there ever was one, poison

dripping from the trees and all. Next he'd lost his (*warped, but still familiar*) version of Castle Byers, all friends welcome. Then his sight, for a while.

It really felt like it should've been over, then. And for maybe two weeks or so it had been.

But next he'd discovered that not even that slab of flesh (*pale skin, sickly, thin, bowl cut*) he lived in was wholly his anymore, and had found himself throwing up slugs into the sink. Next came worries about what the slugs might be *doing* down there in the drains. Then insomnia had taken him, and taken him *hard*. Finally there came the longing to just not feel anything any more. Of course that'd been there from the very beginning, but it had never run strong enough for him to actually act on it. But by now he'd done that, too, had tried to drown it all out; the bloodstains still left on his clothes bearing witness of it.

Not much had remained then; but still enough to be taken from him. He'd forever prided himself on his ability to draw better than any of his friends; better than anyone else in his class. Now all that he drew was like a warped reflection of himself, that even he couldn't stand to look at.

That had been the state of things until yesterday. This morning, though, he'd found that apparently throwing slugs up hadn't been enough yet when puking the sorry remains of what little he'd eaten for lunch the day before down the toilet, before he'd collapsed on the floor as well, for good measure. Now, for the first time in months his pretense of normality was shattered. He hadn't gone to school today.

It got him every time. Whenever he'd gotten halfway used to his situation, it spiraled out further.

Fooled you! It seemed to scream, every time.

Fooled you, you little worthless fag!

Maybe you thought that this was it, but fooled you again!

More than anything, Will wanted to cry. Only he'd done that already,

and it hadn't helped one bit, either. More than anything, he wanted to scream. Except the only one to scream at would've been El, and she didn't deserve that.

In fact, the only thing he could do right now was lying in his bed, missing school, and staring against that bland and hating ceiling above him. At least lying awake at night he couldn't see it; now, with the sun up there was more than enough light to make the sight inescapable. The thing seemed to float in front of him, in front of his eyes, seemed to invade his mind and float around there as well.

Have a nice fly through the fairylands of fucking pain, little gay fairy!
THROUGH FUCKING PAIN!

Will had always liked reading books (*except now he couldn't even do that; now books were only a shield to avoid talking because no one interrupted him when he was pretending to read*), and in some of them there'd been a lot of talking about the light at the end of the tunnel. Well, if there was a tunnel then maybe there was a light, too; but truth be told, it seemed to him it was more like an endless mine-shaft that he was currently falling down; and the only spot of daylight was to his back.

Sometimes, they were small lights; bright little spots that made him feel almost (*but never completely*) normal. Only none if then ever lasted. At some point, another trapdoor would open and swallow him. Sure, his mother had patched him back together when he'd come back from school, bleeding. Sure, he'd managed to talk to her from ... from *that place*. And sure as hell he'd been brought back (*they all said he'd come back, but that was a lie; they'd brought him back, dragged him out because alone he'd been too weak*), and there'd been a week or two as bright as anything could ever be. Never helped him when the next fall came, though. Almost made it worse, instead, really; that short vision of what life could be like snatched away by some all-encompassing cosmic bully.

Oh look here, sweet Will, here, look at this life, now wouldn't that be a nice thing to have, to live? —

— **FOOLED YOU AGAIN, YOU WORTHLESS LITTLE FAG!**

Still, without those moments Will couldn't have lived.

In fact, without those, he might've just starved to death that morning in February, 1984, lying in his bedroom in a small house in Hawkins, Indiana, because he couldn't have stood up even if it was to feed himself.

He might've just lain there, hating the dull gray ceiling above him, might've decided *why bother? Why bother waiting for the next trapdoor?* Oh, there would've been guilt, of course, guilt about Jonathan and his mother and his friends; guilt that he was just leaving them alone.

But why even bother? he thought to himself, helpless, staring.

Then, suddenly, he heard steps coming up to his room, soft, quiet steps, as if someone was taking great care for someone else (that this someone else might be him didn't occur to Will). Then there was the sound of someone gripping the door handle, slowly pressing it downwards. Next came a creak.

Finally, the door slowly swung open, and for one single, sharp moment of bright, perfect terror Will was convinced that the door would swing fully open and there'd be Troy behind it, come to gloat and scream *FOOLED YOU AGAIN, FAG, HAHA!*, or his father to do the same, or the Demagorgon. He found his body was shivering, skin covered in goosebumps while cold, ice shivers raced down his back. His own breathing became not a lifeline but a drum, a drum of terror.

The door swung fully open, and Will was ready to just scream, scream, *screa* —

Oh it was El, just El, thank God, just El, just El, just El (*just El just El just El*), El using one of these large, hardcover cookbooks that his mother had but never used as a sort of makeshift-tablet, carrying a wild assortment of foods on it. There was a plate, with some slices of toast, an egg lying next to it, kept from rolling down by something that looked like magic tape; a glass of apple juice, a cup of water with a bunch of teabags lying next to it as well as a collection of snacks that El had presumably found lying around the house. Will was almost surprised at the lack of an Eggo; almost nothing that El did came without one. Also, for some reason unfathomable to him,

she'd added a bottle of coke.

El carefully stepped around the clothes on the floor, around her own makeshift bed of blankets and sleeping bag. More than once he thought that she surely must fall over; there was simply no way she'd keep her balance with this disordered heap of food in her hands (once or twice the old cookbook seemed to float for a second while El staggered, searching for balance). Finally she set it down on his bedside table.

The whole display simply screamed her name so much, he was sure the old Will would've burst out laughing (except, of course, that the old Will had never known her). As it was, he simply wondered why the egg had not simply cracked while boiling, but cracked in such a distinctly unlikely pattern. It had cracked in an exact, perfectly straight line, going up from the bottom end in a sort of spiral around the whole thing before finally reaching the top.

Looking at it, half of Will felt sicker still; he knew he really shouldn't eat anything so soon after vomiting. The other half was simply hungry. He tried his best to ignore that one; he'd fallen far enough already without him making it worse as well. Vomiting once per day was enough.

Except ... he guessed there was nothing wrong with a bit of tea. In fact, since none of his family had ever been a fan of tea the only reason they had some at all was for cases like this. Probably his mother had mentioned that to El sometime, so now she'd gotten some water and all the teabags she'd found and brought them him, no doubt expecting that he'd know which one to take. Except he didn't, and all at once he felt worse again. Who was he, lying ill at home and not even knowing which teabag was the right one?

Belatedly, he realized he probably should say something. The old Will would've done that the moment she'd come in the door. His nagging feeling of inadequacy intensified.

Thanks, El, was all he finally managed to stammer.

You're welcome.

If there'd been an award for starting awkward conversations, Will very much doubted there'd need to be a jury. Just give him the thing every time.

More in order to do something than because of anything else Will grabbed one of the teabags. He didn't read what it said on it; he'd just chosen that one because its dark blue color seemed slightly more inviting than those of the others (red looked like ... well, no need to go there, and black ... black just served to remind him of the sort of drawings he'd stuffed away so no one would see them). He ripped the paper open, drew out the bag, and put it into the cup of water.

Nothing happened.

Hmm.

Well, was there even something supposed to happen?

Will didn't know, he'd never actually drunken any tea before; or at least none that he'd made himself. For a moment he stared at the whole thing. He was pretty sure he'd done something wrong.

Worthless little fag, can't even make tea! Troy's (or was it his father's?) voice echoed through his mind. Sweat broke out on his face. El was here, after all, she'd see how inadequate he was, how clumsy, how ... how *worthless*. Already she looked at him, disquieted.

"Something wrong?" she asked, he voice considered, and, amazingly, *kind*.

And finally, *finally*, he noticed it. There wasn't any steam above the water. It was cold, just simple tap water. No one had ever told El that that it was supposed to be hot, after all. He did, now.

Then, for a moment, she had *that look* on her face, and bubbles began appearing in the not-yet-tea all at once. Not even five seconds later it was boiling, and El had wiped a little blood from her nose.

"You ... you didn't have to ..." Uw, *God*, why couldn't he just *talk*?

"I know," El cut him off, sparing him the need to come up with further words.

After that, time passed in silence for a while. When the the water inside his cup had reached a color that Will found a little more likable than how it'd looked before (not that he had much to say about colors, these days) he took the teabag out and tried a sip. Whatever taste it might've had was promptly lost when it burned his mouth and lips, and then his tongue as well, for good measure.

Fooled you again! Will almost thought, but with El still beside him, it didn't feel as bad as it might've done otherwise. He blew on the tea, hoping that would do something (it did, but not much).

After a while, El grasped his hand. Will would never know what had prompted her to do that, but he was grateful all the same. Some part of his brain might scream at him, might chastise him for being so damned *weak* using words that his father might've used (*What kind o' fag are you, huh? Needing to hold a GIRL'S hand, you, to feel safe? She should be holding yours, not you hers. Jesus. What a fucking weakling*) but Will now barely heard it.

You shouldn't like things just because people say you're supposed to, Jonathan had told him, and Will suspected he might've had a point there.

Here he was, at home, half beneath a blanket, his hand held by a friend who'd brought him breakfast. He wasn't happy, no, but ... safe. Yeah, that was it. He felt *safe*. How could he not? El had saved his life once already.

After a while, El turned to look at him. "You better?"

"Yeah," he said, "much better."

El didn't say anything in return, but her content smile was answer enough.

Will tried his tea again. It was almost drinkable, now.

El was sitting at his desk, drawing. Somehow, Will had never thought

about what El did in her spare time; maybe because he wasn't actually around for much of it. Mostly he'd be at school, and once he got home *El* would have her own strange school with Mr. Clarke. They lived in the same house, sure, even slept in the same room; but Will still knew remarkably little about *her*.

Mostly, he just knew about the Eggos, and really, that was just inescapable. Since she'd first slept in this house their Eggo consumption had not only gone up but practically blown the roof off, to the point that his mum would only buy some once or twice a week. Will would see El munching an Eggo more often than not; she was really quite imaginative about where one could eat Eggos. Tables, obviously, and the couch; but somehow she'd gotten Mr. Clarke to allow her eating during her "classes" in the living room, no matter how much that man wouldn't allow anyone to eat during (regular) class; he'd found Eggo-crumbles in her makeshift-bed, in his X-Men comics, on the buttons of his supercomm and basically everywhere else in his (and now also her) room, he'd even once overheard his mum telling her that no, she could *not* go and take a shower while chewing on one.

If her life had consisted solely of searching for places to eat waffles Will probably wouldn't have been surprised. Only, it'd turned out that it *didn't*.

And so right now she'd taken his desk and his crayons, left the room for a moment to come back with a little stack of paper and then sat down to draw.

For some minutes after she'd sat down and taken the first sheet of the stack, Will just watched her. Much better than just staring at that much-hated gray of the ceiling above him.

Except it slowly became increasingly clear to him that El was very, *very* bad at drawing. Like, *seriously* bad. Never mind right proportions or stuff like that; just be happy if the stick figures actually had *noses*. Well, short black lines pretending to be noses, anyways.

For a while he watched her workings with a sort of morbid fascination. Not that her being bad at it somehow justified making fun of her, far from it, but it just ... *bothered* him. He'd spent half his

life drawing (well, the half he hadn't been busy with school, eating, sleeping, or getting beaten by anyone, be it Troy or his father), and no matter how unable he was right now to actually paint anything that didn't look like total shit it still meant the world to him. And at least the shit he drew still had people in it who looked like, well, *people*, not an assortment of sticks.

Well, he considered, just because he didn't like her drawings was no reason to get angry. She seemed happy enough, after all, setting stroke after stroke, until finally it contained to stick-figures, one of whom had a sort of brownish-yellowish hair, while the other stood a little away from the first and was almost bald; only a thick black line indicated what might've meant to be hair. Between them there were three more lines making what might be called a table, and whatever was on the table was a heap of confusion that Will really couldn't make out.

It took him longer than he would've liked to admit to realize what he saw. This was them this morning, when El'd come in with the old cookbook carrying her strange homemade breakfast for him.

Finally she seemed satisfied; a few last touches here and there, and El sat back, looking at her work. There was something there, Will thought, something he knew well, something in *how* she sat there ...

At last it came to him. El displayed that special sort of pride of an artist who'd just finished a piece, and finished it in a way that made her happy. It *was* a feeling that he knew well, then. Well, *had known*. Now, he thought, sadly, there was only anger, and that hidden drawer where he hid his works, even from himself.

Another trapdoor had opened there some time ago, he suspected. If he'd craned his mental neck to look at long-ago memories (*only a few months, of course, but it sure seemed like the long-ago of legend*) maybe he would've seen them, those bright times when that had been him sitting there, painting, contend.

El, meanwhile, had gotten up from the desk and was now comparing one of Will's drawings that he and his mother'd stuck on the wall with her own (it was of him and his friends, or rather, their DnD characters, on a quest; Will himself, Will the Wise, was shooting

green fireballs because the more appropriate colors had been out the day he'd painted it. His mother might say they that they looked like cabbages, but he'd liked it all the same). Standing there, El's pride turned into something altogether different. That Will knew as well; just getting of the high feeling of happiness after finishing a work and then looking at something that a *real* artist had made, and seeing the difference between the two. It could be more than a little disappointing, or it could motivate one more, or even both at once. For a moment or two, Will tried out comforting sentences to say, but then he realized something.

His own work was *good*. Even this one, where the fireballs weren't, well, fire-colored but green like cabbages. And of course he'd known all that, on some level; his mother said so, and his brother, and Mike and Dustin, even Lucas who'd never cared much about drawing wouldn't deny he admired him a bit for it. But it had never been so ... well, so *real*. It was one thing to receive compliments, he considered, but quite another to see someone else admiring one's work in a way that said *I wish I was that good*.

And with that all candidate sentences he might've said flew right out the window (down the trapdoor).

Seemingly a thousand things and ideas ran simultaneously around and through his head, madly, with no apparent plan or organization beyond pure randomness. His intent to say something got muddled in a thunderstorm of ideas and non-ideas, in actions proposed and aborted before even deciding they were to be made. His head felt like it might explode under pressure from both illness and confusion. *Any minute now*, Will thought, *and I'll burst*.

Except, of course, that wasn't what really happened. On the inside Will might've been close to being overwhelmed, but seen from the outside ... well, at most there was maybe a little stutter. An certain air of awkwardness, maybe. And though Will had meant to say something, in the end everything canceled everything else out and left him small, shaking, and fumbling his blanket. Worse, Will *knew* that feeling. It had happened to him before, after all.

And Will *hated* it. *Hated* it, but still remained motionless.

Maybe, if one had looked close enough, one might've seen an eye twitching, or just the barest shade of red on his cheeks or his face, red from anger; maybe even lips that were halfway on their way to forming sounds. But only if one looked closely enough.

El, comparing her painting with the one at the wall, not even looking at Will, certainly didn't seem to notice it. Will couldn't even blame her; why *should* she notice, when he didn't give her any indication?

Numbly, defeated by his own inability to fight, Will watched her getting back to his (her) desk.

There had to be *something* he could do. Sam hadn't just given up when the orcs had captured Frodo; *he* hadn't been broken by a single defeat, no matter how dangerous and final it might look.

So surely there had to be *something* that he could do?

Will felt a little better than he'd had this morning after waking up and vomiting. For some time he'd been almost catatonic, fearing that maybe a slug would announce its way out and he couldn't move, couldn't go hide in the bathroom and then El would ... well, would *know* ...

But he felt better now. Maybe it had been the tea, maybe just the fact that there was someone here who'd served him breakfast (no matter how strange) even when neither Jonathan nor his mother were here. Possibly it was just the feeling of being cared for that took some of the misery away from him. That sounded awfully cliché, even to him (*fag you're a fag a fag is all you are*), but it might just be the truth as well. Or it was just the sheer need to *do* something.

And right now, that something was sitting up, and getting to his desk and to El. Of course the only chair was already taken by her, but the bedside table looked close enough ...

Slowly, laboriously, Will made his way. Halfway there and El turned to help him, but he shook his head and El understood. This was *important*, and he didn't just want to be floated over to the table. No, this was something he'd do himself, like a one-man quest. *The Coming of Will The Wise to The Bedside Table At His Desk*, if you so want. It

sure was a perilous one, full of hidden holes and traps (*trapdoors*) labeled with things like *giving up* and *stumbling and falling back* and, worst of all *slug incoming!* But Will The Wise wasn't quite like Will Byers; unlike the latter he'd already braved many a dangerous quest, and he braved this one as well.

There'd been many things that Will had done with a pencil which he'd thought difficult. There was the painting of Will the Wise with the fireballs that looked like cabbages, for one thing. Will really liked that one, and it'd taken him a long while to properly finish it. There was another one, just of his friends and himself, which he thought had come out quite well, too. There was the one of Jonathan and his mother that he'd carried around in his schoolbag for half a year before it'd finally been torn apart between books and various other notes he'd thrown in there. He'd used to look at it, in secret, whenever Troy had ruined his day, just to make him remember home and that not everyone hated him (that'd been before he'd really become friends with Mike Lucas, and long before Dustin showed up). And, deep in his heart and hidden from everyone (and maybe especially from himself), he suspected that at least some of the distorted, haunted images he'd drawn since coming back here (*coming back to life*) were probably quite good as well, if he could only stand to look at them.

In any case, Will could draw better than most boys his age, and most of the time he knew that, too.

He'd just never suspected that teaching someone *else* to draw would actually be difficult. It turned it was, though. Damned-well difficult. Like, seriously difficult. And sure, he'd once spent an afternoon or two with Lucas after he'd complained that every time he took some crayons the result was a load of undecipherable knotted strings, but that hadn't been like these here, now. That'd mostly been afternoons of fun banter between the two of them, with Lucas making an almost uncountable number of self-conscious jokes about just how much he sucked at drawing. This wasn't like that. Not at all.

For one thing, he now had a student who was *actually* interested in

how to draw, and clung to his every word like like, say, Dustin to whatever Mr. Clarke was always talking about in classes. Not that Will didn't pay attention to his teacher, far from it, but there was a certain intensity in Dustin's focus that he'd never be able to match no matter how hard he'd try. And just that stare now bore down on him, a glaring intensity and desperation for advice, and Will had just absolutely no idea on how to deal with that.

El was ... well, she was a little like a sponge, he supposed. Whatever he *told* he she'd suck right up into a mental memory Will could only dream of. If he told her absolutely everything he knew about drawing and how to draw and what colors or crayons to use she'd probably deposit it somewhere in her mind and play the whole thing back if asked, but ... actually *applying* all of that turned out to be more difficult than Will would've thought.

Will did his best to be patient, and to show her again and again how he did it. It was irritating, really; as far as Will could remember drawing had always come so easy to him that it had simply never occurred to him that others might *actually* struggle with it. He guessed there was some reason why their drawings didn't look as good, but he'd never actually thought that through.

I guess now I know why Dustin always has that look on when explaining me our latest homework for the third time. He'd always thought it was a trademarked Dustin-look-of-oh-god-how-dense-exactly-are-you, the way his smile was a trademarked Dustin-what-the-are-you-trying-to-split-your-head-smile, except he now had a very real urge to let that very same expression of annoyance flash over his face.

Meanwhile, he let his mouth chew on the egg. It had an interesting sort of texture to it, actually; he'd asked El about it, and she'd said (through many I'm-searching-for-words-pauses) that she hadn't heated it in a uniform sort of pattern but in something more swirly instead, with no better explanation than *I was bored*. Hence the layered look it had, the the spiral pattern into which the outer shell had shattered.

"It tastes really well, actually," he'd told her, and she'd flushed with pleasure in reply. It did, too, if a bit different from normal. Friends didn't lie, after all.

By now the tea was gone (Will didn't think he'd become a fan of that stuff any time soon, but at least he could imagine that it'd helped and that he must be a little better now). They'd both drunken half of the apple juice, and El had eaten the toasts (Eggs, it turned out, where out, *again*).

Together they finished skinny-not-quite-stick-man number five. Yep, definitely looked a little better now. Will suddenly felt pride at El's improvements. Maybe this teacher thing wasn't all bad after all.

Thirst, though, slowly got a problem again. Looking over at the old cookbook that was by now covered beneath crumbles, he saw there was only the inexplicable can of coke left. He looked at it, then at El.

"I thought you didn't like coke?" *I thought you using that tone about coke meant that you never, ever want to touch it?* He might not have asked what it was about the coke, but Will remembered that decisive, almost cold tone she'd used when saying *no* well.

"No," came her answer, and just as quickly as the first time, and almost as hard.

"So?" he asked, the question written all over his face.

"No, but ... I ... I thought you did."

Will suddenly felt an intense need to hug her, so he did, at least a little, laying his arm around her shoulders and drawing her closer. Smiling, El handed him the crayon she was holding, the one they'd used for skinny-not-quite-stick-man number five.

"Now you?"

Oh. *Oh*. Now this was a touchy subject. "Ah ... no ... ah, I don't really draw ... anymore," Will stammered an answer, trying his best not to think about that drawer over there in the cabinet and what was stuffed inside; trying his best to banish this dangerous topic as quickly as he could. For a moment, he thought he had succeeded.

"But ..." El's face was confusion as much as anything else, "... but, over there ..."

For a moment Will didn't know what she was talking about at all. For another one, he did his best to repeat over and over again *she can't know she can't she just can't*. For a third he thought he was safe because she hadn't moved and was still there, with his arm around her shoulders. And then, in a final one of total crisp clarity and horror, he realized that with El that didn't matter.

And yep, sure enough, that hated drawer bumped into the table mere seconds later.

Haha, fooled you again! Fooled you a-fuckin' AGAIN! Oh, this never gets old! Hey everyone, Will Byers, now there's a real hard loser, don't you all agree? Loser, loser, loser ...

Suddenly it wasn't him hugging El anymore, it was her supporting his weight on her shoulders so he didn't collapse and fall to the ground.

Will stared at the drawer, at what was inside it, stared at his own works with a hate he'd never felt before. *Here it is*, he thought, bitterly, *here's my life, and oh, look! There might even be a place somewhere in there that's not totally fucked up! Don't know where, but it's gotta be in there somewhere, maybe right next to that distorted fella here or that monster over there!*

Slowly he tore his eyes away and back onto El, and suddenly his hate turned into white-hot anger. How had she known? *How had she known?*

"El," he burst out only to find that he couldn't even be angry properly because by now he was crying, his eyes where overflowing and he was fucking *crying* and *hey everyone, wanna see a real little crybaby just come right here, take a good long look at this old freak! Oh yeah, fuckin' fag is fuckin' crying, see here, take a nice long look!* "How do you know? *How do you know?*" he tried to scream it out, tried to let the words rip his own throat out but all that he could produce seemed to be worthless toneless sobs. "You know you always talk about how friends don't lie, but you know what? You know what ..." here he had to stop for a moment, to wipe his eyes clean from all the tears, "You know what, they don't fucking *spy* on each other, either, and you're a real creepy freak for doing that! You're ..."

Suddenly he realized what he was actually saying, realized that he'd just called her *creepy* and a *freak* and that those were exactly the words that Troy or his father would use to wreck his life again and again, except look at this mess here! In the face of his own failed life he hadn't turned out any better than either of them.

That thought did the rest to him, and as if struck by lightning Will collapsed and fell over, a sobbing wreckage of a boy lying on the floor.

"El," he forced out his shacking, crying throat, "El, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean any of that, it's not really you that I'm angry at, just, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, El ..."

It felt like ages as he lay there, no matter how quickly El dragged him up again, placing his shivering body back in its bed. He didn't know why she was still there. He didn't ask, either, though he was glad that she was. He just cried into her arms.

When he'd calmed down enough to actually hear anything else than his own sobbing, El said quietly "I know. I just ... know. It's like ... seeing, but ... different."

Shaking, desperate, Will tried to get a hold of himself. "So you're saying you can just ... sense ... what is going on, like, with your powers? You just know what is behind walls?"

"A bit, yeah. I thought everybody could."

"No," he told her, now hugging her again, holding her close, or rather, holding himself close to her. Clinging to her. *She hasn't been spying on me*, he thought, hating himself for ever holding doubts already.

Moment after moment passed where all that happened where a few quiet sobs from Will, and an unspoken safety coming of El holding him, taking him in.

And only there, and only then, finally, slowly, could Will bring himself to acknowledge the obvious but terribly far-reaching implications that this might have.

There was a question there, somewhere, floating around in the back of his mind, irritatingly refusing to come forward just as much as it refused to go. Just ... something. Something there, something that he had to think about but couldn't bring himself to really confront either, and it scared Will more.

But El held him, safe, secure.

There wouldn't be any peace until he'd asked the question, he knew that well enough; if not spoken aloud and answered it would haunt the back of his head continuously until it *was* answered. So while Will lay abed, still crying softly, still clinging to his friend, he chased the question down. When he found it, it felt like a monster was hidden inside him, a monster luring him in and waiting for blood.

But it *had* to get out, all the same.

So Will asked her the question.

"What else do you know? About me?" The words were barely a whisper, and yet they were all-encompassing. Just the faintest of winds, but it felt like words depended on them. And one in particular. *His* world.

And though formulating it had seemed like the hardest thing he'd ever done, now, with it hovering between them, the waiting seemed almost worse. The uncertainty of what the answer might be, and what it might entail.

El steadied him, made him sit on his own so that here hands were free. In her face Will could see that she understood, now, and that she was sad.

When she drew one hand out to him and brought it to lay across his chest he almost screamed. *Would* have, had there been any screaming left in him.

Instead, all that was was a thought like a rumbling, rambling thunder: *She knows. She knows. She knows. She knows.* It came again and again, first monotonous, then with variations. *She knows. She knows. She knows.* All were powerful, and all brought

their own wave of emotions and terror.

For a long, long time Will just sat there and stared.

“For how long?” Will asked.

He wasn’t sure how much time had passed. Might be hours, might just be minutes; just the time he’d taken to process that his awful secret was finally out.

“Since I came,” she said, then added “back” as though it was an afterthought.

Silence for a moment, then she asked “Only I ... know?”

For a moment he wondered why she hadn’t told anyone, but of course the answer was laid out clear before him already. Of course she hadn’t. She’d thought that everyone could sense it the way she could, after all, because it wasn’t so obviously a thing that only she could do. She’d thought that everyone already *knew*.

He shook his head in reply. Speech seemed like a really precious thing right now.

“About the blood? On clothes?”

By now he felt like he was miles away, and this question didn’t hit him nearly as much as the others had done. Of course she knew about the blood on his clothes; and probably also where those stains came from. She could probably see the scars on him just fine no matter how many shirts he could wear above them.

“Yeah.” That was all he managed to pronounce. There really wasn’t much else to say, after all; here was who he was and what he’d done since ... well, since *that place* had happened, all laid bare. And now El knew just how fucked up and *wrong* he really was.

Well, he thought, *pretending was nice, I guess*. And it had been, truly. But that was over, now. She knew, and she knew all of it.

Nothing else to say, now. Will felt the terribly familiar sensation of falling through a trapdoor.

It surprised him a bit, looking beside him, that she was still there, and still holding him. But then again, he'd have known had she left, because he'd have fallen over for sure, then.

It took him a lot longer, though, to realize that she wasn't just *still there*, she also wasn't going to leave, either. Well, maybe if he dragged it out long enough and his mother came home she would have to, but until that she seemed determined to stick with him.

And it took him a lot, *lot* longer until he finally realized that she was trying to get his attention and say something, and something important. When he finally did he turned to look at her once again, and for a moment wondered if maybe he'd been wrong; maybe she *did* intend to leave him, after all, and had just waited to say something first. Well, he didn't need no explanation for why no one in their right mind would want to stick with someone like *him*.

"I could ... help. Or ... try."

Will scoffed, and for a moment was on the verge of breaking down into hysterical laughter.

"Help?" he asked, incredulously, "Is there even anything anyone *could* do?"

It felt like a mocking repeat of Lucas's question at the last Elrond's-Council meeting. As Dustin had said, of course there wasn't anything to *do* about it, just as there wasn't anything to be done about that monster El'd told them was out there, waiting to get a chance and spring at all of their throats. There was a monster out there so overpowering that even a girl with superpowers was scared shitless, and that beast was coming to eat them, and he was sure as hell not going to get any better.

I am Will Byers, he thought, *and that is the truth*.

"I could try ... get it out. The slugs. The thing *inside*." As if there was any need to clarify what *thing* she meant, El laid her hand on his

chest again. Shivers ran down his neck and back and arms all the way to his fingertips which vibrated in pure, stark fear for a moment.

“How?”

She looked at him as if he was stupid, used that look Dustin did when explaining science to his denser peers, that look he himself had averted just an hour before by stuffing some bits of an interestingly boiled egg down his throat. She didn't even say anything in return, just made the can of coke float over from where they'd left it on his desk.

Like this, dumbass. She didn't say it, but the words were there as much as the coke floating in front of Will. But she was smiling, too.

The can popped open.

You really should drink something, was what it seemed to say. Will took it, and gulped almost half of it down in one go. The sweetness of it almost blew his mind, and only while swallowing did Will realize how much he'd needed that. It was almost like some Doctor's drug; for a short moment at least, it seemed to help him think.

He thought of what had happened until now.

“No,” he said, putting the can down on his bedside table, “it probably wouldn't work.”

It would only make matters worse, or even just kill me dead entirely. Will was somewhat surprised that the thought of dying still scared him away, that his own life still mattered at all. He hadn't really believed that.

Besides, if I die, what'll become of El and Jonathan, my friends and mum? They'd only blame themselves, or worse, *her*. No, he wouldn't do that to them.

“You sure?” El looked almost hurt, as if insulted that he didn't trust her, but ... *I'm doing this for her*, he thought, surer now.

“Yeah,” he said, trying to convince (but if it was her or himself whom was trying to convince he wasn't at all sure), “I'm sure.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I really, *really* hope this isn't too long. I feel like it should be maybe half as long, but I can't seem to cut it any shorter than it is now (and it was longer, originally ...)

Ah well.

Oh, and also, I have no idea what happens with teabags in cold water, but I guess there's probably a reason why the water should be hot ...

Too all you who struggled through, hope you enjoyed it!

8. Scott Clarke

Being a teacher, Scott Clarke reflected, while sitting in the staff room on an early Monday morning before classes were set to start, being a teacher had its ups and downs. There were, of course, high points; in fact, the pure feeling of being able to help in educating the young had been a huge part in why he'd chosen the profession in the first place, and why he'd endured the ridicule of his peers, who'd applied themselves to the more advantageous places in their universities or gone off to interesting-sounding jobs in wealthy and successful companies. Had he ever bothered to phone some of them up, he wouldn't have been surprised to learn that several of them were now professors themselves, and that several others worked for governmental organizations or even the military. With war looming around every corner, physicist was a profitable profession.

He'd thought about joining them, for a while, but found that for him, *spreading* science to interested people was at least as important (and interesting, as a job) as *furthering* science itself was. And it'd been worth it, too; of course many students preferred other subjects (which, he'd come to accept, he just had to respect), but normally in every class there were one or two who'd cling to his every word, and whom he hoped he did a good job by. Many of them'd won a science fair or two, so Scott Clarke thought he hadn't done it *completely* wrong, at least.

And of course he'd know it wouldn't be only that. Bullies and similarly entitled-thinking spreaders of misbehavior he'd learned to deal with; parents who neglected their children and then blamed *him* for it he hated (though he did what little he could to help the children in question), and those who'd excused the behavior of their bullying children he despised even more; the smug smiles and ridiculous excuses for missing homework given by children who thought themselves too cool for critical thinking he'd come to terms with as well. More or less, all of those had been things to expect. He'd been a student himself once, after all, and been forced to deal with his share of bullies in his own time. Now, he just tried his best to be better in supporting the actually interested students than his teachers had once supported him.

But for all this, he'd never once thought that the worst part about being a teacher would be the staff room. When he'd been a student that had been a mysterious but also boring place, and at most he thought the teachers went there for their daily cup of coffee or tea.

Well, it had turned out there was more to it than that. In fact, the staff room always felt a little like recess had done when he'd been a student himself, when the big boys better at sports than himself showed up. Only sports had been replaced through constant infighting among the teachers and sheer pure nastiness; it seemed that at least some of the teachers were determined to bully at least as much as the students did. That was why he was here so early, when access to the coffee machine was still unrestricted from the like of Mrs. Andros, who was the worst of the lot. A woman wrong in this profession if there'd ever been one, though Scott struggled to think of where she'd do any better. Coming from her classes the students looked more like they'd been forced to spent the last hour with a Shoggoth than as though they'd learned anything.

Mr. Tompson was scarcely better; though his effects, at least, were limited to the male half of his potential victims. Not that Scott Clarke thought that such a narrow-minded minded man would ever consider the thought of allowing girls into his gym.

In short, if one were to compile a complete list of all the racists and sexist citizens of this country, Scott Clarke wouldn't at all be surprised if a disproportionate amount of them turned out to be teachers. And to think that those had all somehow wormed their way through their required exams and qualifications! At times he wanted to vomit, really, at the state of the educational system.

That was not to say it was all bad, of course. Mrs McDonald was loved by half the student body as a cool aunt and by the other half as a second and more supportive mother; Scott Clarke might not be completely sure as to how much they actually *learned* in her classes, but the emotional support they received there was without equal. Mr. Campton, meanwhile, had such a passion for his subject (English), and such a gift for conveying it that even Scott was almost interested in topics he'd hated with a passion during his own time at school. And of course Scott Clarke dearly hoped that he could count himself among them (he wasn't so stupid as to take that for granted; if there

was one thing that he'd learned when dabbling in actual research — really just the stuff they let students at university do — then that was the effect a solid confirmation bias had even on an exact science).

Except none of them were capable to break the game that the others had started; they even had to play it themselves, especially Scott, whenever Mr. Clarke wanted to get some equipment funded mingling with other people was almost unavoidable. Not that this was an inherently bad thing, but discussions consisting of constant ad-hominem attacks were *tiring*.

Well, right now and today he thankfully wasn't in such an unfortunate position, and so he quickly slipped out the staff room as soon as he caught sight of Mrs. Andros with no more than a mumbled *morning* in her general direction; he'd just have to finish that coffee somewhere in the hallway, or in his classroom. Though he suspected that he'd probably had enough for a day already, the way his thoughts had started rumbling again about the whole situation.

Well, never mind. There were students to teach, after all, and some of them might even *want* to be taught something.

Classes went well today, and this one in particular. Mr. Clarke had handed out corrected homework from the week before, had done a short revision of the things covered there and assisted anyone with questions (and anyone who had trouble with deciphering their teacher's handwriting); once or twice all he'd managed to achieve had been a confused stare, but at least as often there'd been that wonderful spark of understanding in his student's eyes. After that he's started to introduce magnetic fields, which left the class in a much happier state than he'd found it; drawing field-lines and watching little metallic scraps lift themselves upright when a magnet passed where thankful topics. Not much new things to cover this year, though; mostly it was refreshing knowledge they should've all picked

up the year before.

Still, it was nice having a class being so silent for once, all drawing their guess at how the field lines of two bar magnets parallel to each and with the same orientation other went (well, all except Dustin, who'd apparently gotten bored and was now adding a third one perpendicular to the other two).

Looking and Mike Wheeler and Lucas Sinclair, though, he found it harder than normal to keep the teacher-mask straight. Mostly they had the same problems as everyone else (Lucas had done the area between the two fine, but somehow jumbled the outside up, while Mike'd flipped one of the magnets around and was left staring at the much less-obvious puzzle that had created), and going to them and spending time on explaining them before anyone else would do no good. He'd been told (and knew by heart) that a teacher shouldn't have favorite students, which he'd tried hard once but soon found to be impossible; so instead Scott tried to keep Mr. Clarke as neutral as he could, and not let any preferences slip through.

Maybe he shouldn't have spent so much time assisting Dustin with his scrap-built megaphone project, then, especially shouldn't have listened about the story he'd told with the compasses ... but *really*, he'd thought they'd be better than that. Not that it was any great failing on their part, of course not; considering the situation they'd been at the time it was probably admirable that even Dustin had remembered the basics (and then some). Maybe his judgment was still clouded from when he'd only known half the story, without that context around it.

You're getting obsessed about that, he told himself. But at the very least worrying about something so inconsequential kept him worrying from the other obvious thing in the room.

Joyce Byers had called in earlier, saying that her son was sick.

Nothing unusual, he told himself. *Maybe the boy ate something bad, or just fell and scraped his knee*. Every now and then students fell ill, same as anyone else. Nothing to worry about.

Except this wasn't just *anyone*. In retrospect, the last three months of

his life read almost a little like a Lovecraftian tale of horror. First a terrible if seemingly explainable event, when Will Byers had been proclaimed missing and later dead, and then ... He himself had been at the burial, but he'd told himself there must be a reasonable explanation, there'd been a mistake or something with the body or just ... well, what was he supposed to know, it wasn't like he was a policemen or detective or something similar. Only it hadn't stopped there, not by far; it had just grown progressively weirder. The boy's behavior afterwards he could easily explain away as trauma, but once he'd found El and Dustin had given him a glimpse on what had *really* gone down that week last fall ...

In retrospect he'd seen everything fall into place, from that strangely urgent late-night call about sensory deprivation tanks to Mike's long-lasting period of mourning *after* his friend had come back. Even today, Mike was far from the boy he'd been before all this, but at least he now *talked* to his friends again, and would dare to show his own knowledge during classes.

Think of something else, Scott, he warned himself. He'd gone down that path before, and knew it did him little good. Hard as it was to accept, in this situation there was truly nothing that he could do (or that he could've done). Contemplating this too much just lead to fruitless anger against the men who'd done this, and that those men dared to call themselves *scientists*. That, judging from the millions that must've been poured into Hawkins Lab, those men were considered more important than not only he himself as teacher or the education system as a whole, but also more important by far than universities and researchers who wouldn't torture children. Ah, what a great system, and what a great nation! Sometimes, these days, he found himself dangerously close to becoming a pure cynic. Maybe, though, that was why he now home schooled El, no questions asked and no pay; to show her (or maybe even himself?) that not *all* scientists were monsters in white.

Seriously, man, think of something else!

Looking around his classroom, Scott Clarke saw that by now most students were either finished or stuck in some unfathomable mess of lines crisscrossing all over the paper. Sometimes it was astonishing, really, how long it took some to understand that field lines just *never*

crossed over. Half the class had started chattering wildly among itself. And Dustin had abandoned this task altogether in favor of a clean sheet of paper, which he was rapidly covering with all sorts of possible combinations of field lines; among them even ones that included magnets with only one pole.

You're too far ahead, boy, monopoles exist only in electronic fields, which are sadly not on the curriculum this year.

For a moment he considered the boy. He'd never gotten the feeling that Dustin Henderson was inclined to showing off, so he was either just bored to death and not as good an artist as his absent friend, or ... well, Scott thought, he looked almost a bit like a theorist systematically going through possible situations, though God only knew for what.

"Okay everyone!" His words shut the chatter almost as much as he'd hoped. "Let's go through this again ..."

"Ah, Mr. Clarke?"

He'd been halfway through tidying up the metal dust from the field-line demonstration that despite all his precautions had spilled over and covered the teacher's desk once *again*. Really, he should just construct a box around the whole thing; he'd have to think of doing that later, having to clean this up every time was just getting annoying. But Dustin's voice broke through those thoughts.

"Dustin. Shouldn't you be along to your next class?"

"Ah, yeah. But ... " Dustin stopped for a moment, looked around once, then continued, "did someone tell you about the last Elrond's Council meeting?"

Oh. This was more important than he'd thought. It occurred to him

that Dustin'd checked if the room was empty when he'd hesitated. "Yes, Mrs. Byers told me about it yesterday."

"Well, when no one knew what to do I thought I'd look around some, and ..."

He placed a sheet of paper on the teacher's desk. It took Scott a moment to comprehend what it was: before him lay a printed map of Hawkins, and on *that* — "Me and Lucas biked around town all yesterday afternoon."

Scott Clarke stared at what lay before him.

"That's magnetic field lines, there," Dustin added helpfully, as if that wasn't already obvious.

On the map there were hand-drawn arrows. *Lots* of them. Scott Clarke thought that he could distinguish three groups of them quite easily: two of them were both apparently pointing to a single point. The third was less ordered; it included those dragged and twisted between the other two, forced by the laws of magnetics to point somewhere else. The map was obviously incomplete; neither of the apparent centers, it seemed, had actually been visited at all. Still, the pattern was obvious.

Two groups of arrows, one centering on a point not far from the cinema, the other on a field a little outside the town. A little south of the line connecting those two, he thought there might even be some signs of a third. It might've been a familiar picture, if not for the fact that *both* of the points seemed to be magnetic north poles, and the half-seen third had no apparent no indication of being a south pole, either.

Lacking an obvious explanation, Scott almost desperately searched for any obvious flaws. There were none. No two lines intersected, and no two lines running alongside each other pointed in wildly different directions.

"So, uhm, we found this, and I thought that this was pretty odd," *yeah, definitely* "and I thought I'd see if I could find anything that made sense of it —" that was the paper he'd seen him draw earlier, the one with the wide arrangement of lines on it — "but I couldn't find anything that makes any sense. I mean, those here —" he

pointed — “look less like a magnet and more as if they’re just *half* of one, just one pole everywhere, if that makes an sense ...”

It’d been a while since Scott Clarke had encountered a problem with field lines he hadn’t been able to solve in an instant. He had simply no idea at all on what to do with this one. Sure, modern particle physics predicted that magnetic monopoles might exist in form of some elementary particle, but so far no one had found one yet, or any evidence that they were anything beyond mere theoretical considerations — most theories of physics allowed for a lot of things that probably didn’t exist. And usually people looked for things like this one with particle accelerators, not compasses in a field.

So either Dustin had just stumbled across one of the greater scientific discoveries in a decade — scrap that, in *several* decades — or he’d overlooked something. And though Scott Clarke thought the former possibility was not without a certain irony to it, he recognized that the latter was probably a whole lot more likely.

“So I’d hoped that maybe you ... knew something.”

No, he thought, *I don’t. Not really.* That wasn’t bad, really; he couldn’t know *everything*, after all, what hurt more was that he’d have to disappoint a student. Once again, he mentally ran through long-forgotten drawers and cupboards, searching for clues. Teacher might be an interesting profession, but it sure didn’t serve to keep a researcher’s mind sharp. Probably there was something in a paper somewhere about things that only *looked* like monopoles if viewed from the correct angle, he’d have to look that up later, or —

Oh. Except ...

Scott ran over to his bag, grabbing the magnet in there, then the thin, light board of wood still laying on his desk. Last came the little can of metallic dust.

Mr. Clark sighed. All that cleaning, and now it was for nothing. Well, it couldn’t be helped. He spread the dust over the board, then handed the whole thing Dustin. “Could you hold this for a moment? Just be careful that it doesn’t all fall off.”

Then, with Dustin keeping the thing nicely above solid ground, he grabbed the magnet and put it beneath the board. So far, so familiar; the dust arranged itself into a nice representation of the bar magnet's field. Dustin looked at him with an annoyed face. *So what?* it seemed to ask him.

Mr. Clarke turned the magnet by a ninety degrees, so that it now stood perpendicular to the wooden plane with the dust. Half the dust fell down and just looked dust-like, but the other half ... well, the other half now was a load of little dust particles all collectively pointing away from the magnet's upper pole, which, when viewed from above, looked a lot like lines just coming out of the point directly above from where he held the bar magnet.

Dustin almost let the board fall down. "Oh, wow!" was all he said, then, "Oh, sorry," when half the metal dust fell to the ground.

"Yeah," Scott Clarke said, "except unless someone's exceptionally good at digging secret tunnels, there's no magnet strong enough for this —" he indicated the pattern on the map — "to happen below ground, but it cannot be above ground, either; there is, to my knowledge, no magnet that's invisible." Here he hesitated, afraid of what would have to come next. "So, if it can't be in either of those directions ..."

Dustin stared at him, eyes wide. "You don't think?"

But Scott Clarke *did* think. In a three-dimensional space, there were only two ways for something to stand perpendicular to a plane. And he'd just taken both of them out of the running, so by all known laws of physics, what Dustin and Lucas had unearthed here shouldn't be possible.

Unless one were to add another dimension to the reasoning, of course.

Notes for the Chapter:

Things start getting weird, I'd guess (and I actually rewrote this chapter when I realized that the original field line pattern I had made no sense at all ... but it

was fun getting into Mr. Clarke's headspace)

Oh, and are PE classes separated by gender in the USA, or were they during the eighties? I just sort of threw that out there without thinking much, but now realized that I don't actually *know* ...

Hope you liked it! Leave a comment if you have any questions/suggestions!

Gazyrlezon.

9. Mike

“Nancy? You don’t ... uh, you don’t have any more wigs, do you?”

Mike’d long hesitated to ask her outright — it seemed much too direct, and much too obvious — but since he hadn’t found anything by himself, not even after going through every single box, drawer and cabinet of old stuff in the entire basement, Mike had honestly run out of ideas and no longer cared. Hell, he’d even take the awkward conversation about why he was asking in the first place if that was what it took. Guilt rushed over him; *No more lies*, they’d promised, and yet he hadn’t told her one word about El reappearing. It just ... he’d wanted to bring it up, but ... well. It’d never seemed right, and then his father’d come in, and ...

But in any case, there was no way how he’d let El be locked in Will’s home any longer; that simply wasn’t a tenable position. Besides, she hadn’t even know what snow was! And even now, that Dustin had told her, she’d never really *experienced* it, had never felt how cold it was, had never thrown herself into it, had never made a ball out of it and thrown it at someone else (though truth be told, Mike would really like to avoid any snowball fights against her; she could, after all, steer any missiles *exactly* where she wanted them to go).

At first he’d thought it was all just down to Lucas being overprotective. Except after he’d demonstrated how much was possible even with a simple pair of binoculars ... Mike could kind of see his point, even if he didn’t like it. Not that he’d let anything so simple stop El from getting outside, no way! So here he was now, in a desperate search of wigs. And had, in fact, just blurted out a question to his sister, who didn’t even know that El was back yet. Who was, in fact, currently busy sorting through her enormous assortment of notebooks from school, and looked rather like she didn’t want to be disturbed while rearranging huge amounts of numbers. Mike hadn’t even said hello first, he’d just burst in.

“Mike?”

Her response, then, was appropriately annoyed and confused for a moment.

“I was asking if you have any more wigs lying around, because I can’t seem to find any.”

For a moment the confusion lingered, then she put down the notebook — it was scrawled full, every last inch covered in writings and numbers, making the thing almost look like Mr. Clarke’s list of what El did — and her face strained in thought for a moment, before that dissolved into disbelief and bafflement.

“What? ... no, I don’t think so, no ...”

“Okay, thanks, I’m off to the store then!”

Mike left her staring, still mystified, and ran out the room and towards the stairs.

“Mike, wait! What’s going —”

But too late; by then, Mike was already down the staircase, had grabbed his backpack and had sprinted through the front door, to his bike lying on the ground outside, waiting for him. He pushed it upright and swung a leg over it as fast as he could, then activated his supercomm while already biking down the street.

“Okay, there’s none of your X-Men comics in my house, Dustin,” he called into it, “Over!”

A moment, then a crack answered him.

“Oh, shit!” Dustin’s voice came back, “Any other ideas where it might’ve gone? Over.”

“Ah, no. But I’ve still some of my allowance left, and I’m sure it’s my fault it’s gone missing.” For a moment Mike was distracted, paying attention to where he was going. End of Maple Street, turn into Jackson Street. I’m heading towards the next shop to buy a new one. Over.

“Okay. Over and out.”

All right now, Dustin would know that he’d be buying a new wig. More importantly, anyone who might be listening in knew that he’d

head to a store, and that he'd buy something there. *If at all possible, try to keep things from looking suspicious.* One of the things said in the first meeting of their Council of Elrond.

Speeding through the streets at something that everyone over twenty (and a not insignificant percentage of those younger as well) would've called an absolutely murderous pace, Mike reflected that being on good terms with one's science teacher certainly generated a few advantages, especially if said teacher was knew that one was hiding a fugitive at a friend's house. It'd been him, together with Dustin and Lucas, who'd worked out the rules for all this.

Always agree on codes beforehand, Mr. Clarke had told them, *switch them regularly.* Presumably thinking of his student's general tendency to unordered chaos (the man knew them too well), he'd added, *let's say once a week. Tell nobody who doesn't need to know.*

They'd switched them again, yesterday evening, when they'd all met at in his house (still no new DnD campaign, though; Dustin and Lucas had teased him to no end about how El was taking up too much of his time). And while they'd sat around the DnD table, discussing codes and stuff, Mike had beyond anything wished that El would be able to join them there as well.

So this morning he'd gone through the entire basement in search of anything that'd get even close to making a new disguise for El. The lab people knew how the last one had looked, after all.

And now, after school, he got almost driven over at a crossing. *Better stop thinking and start concentrating on what's happening around you,* he told himself. The traffic might be particularly heavy this afternoon — in the hours between school ending and people coming home from work Hawkins was generally as quiet as a town can be, realistically — and all that made the white van that sped past him just as he got close to his destination all the more obvious. There was no time to see whether there was any text on it, or if there was what it might've said, but really there was no need to look. Mike knew that particular model of van too well by now to be fooled.

Crossing the street one last time, almost on the parking lot, Mike pressed the supercomm's send-button again.

“Almost there. Over.” That was code, too; status updates that contained basically no news would only be sent out in case something with a connection to the lab was in the area.

“Okay, understood. Over.”

Now Dustin would be adding another entry to their ever-growing list of white-van sightings.

Mike, meanwhile, left his bike lying on the ground next to the store’s entrance, though this time he packed the supercomm into his backpack, which he took inside with him. Stepping through the entrance, Mike was greeted with a pleasant burst of warm, comfortable air, which he ignored. Inside were as many people as he’d ever seen there; it wasn’t hard, really, to get lost among them. *To hide amongst them, you mean*, he corrected himself. No use fooling anyone about the situation.

Luckily, Hawkins was just the right size for this; large enough to warrant its own store just for toys and magazines, small enough so that it was only *one* store, with everything in the same building. So Mike could just as easily buy costumes here as X-Men comics, without looking suspicious. If anyone’d tapped into his call earlier, they wouldn’t notice any apparent contradictions.

Still, there was probably a white van somewhere outside, waiting for him to come out; maybe there was even someone following him (Mike tried to tell himself that he was paranoid, but really, when it came to El he’d rather be paranoid than give anyone any chance to catch her), so he tried to be as quick about this as he possibly could. Anyone who might be watching would, after all, believe that he knew exactly which comic he intended to buy. So went straight to the costume section, then strolled through it once, taking everything in.

There were only two wigs he could see right away, and one was blond with shoulder-long hair, so there was no question which one he’d have to take. Mike turned round, walked through the aisle a second time and grabbed it, took half a look at it (brown hair, shorter, could conceivably be a boy’s haircut) and stuffed it into his backpack.

Then back to the front, towards the checkout. But before that, he grabbed the newest X-Men comic. It'd only come out a few days ago, and he knew Dustin hadn't got it yet. Then, onward, towards the queues lining up there. Mike desperately hoped he'd get through this here quickly.

Finally, when it was his turn, he first presented the comic, then dragged the wig out. Hopefully the clerk would assume he was just embarrassed about buying such a *girly* thing. Mike paid. *Good. Now stuff the thing back into the backpack ...*

On his way out, Mike held the X-Men comic across his chest, and only crammed it to the wig when he'd reached the bike. Leaving the parking lot, he caught sight of the white van standing nicely in a line with the rest of the parked cars.

HAWKINS ENERGY AND LIGHT, it read in big blue letters across its side.

Maybe he just imagined it, but Mike was pretty sure he could hear an engine starting as he left the lot, heading towards Will's house.

Standing in front of Will's front door, Mike took a tentative look at his surroundings, but couldn't find any white van around. Maybe, then, it hadn't been there for him after all. Maybe, maybe, it really had just been an ordinary state-employed electrician driving around town for some other reason.

Or maybe its just gotten better at hiding. Shuddering, Mike walked up to the door. The shock of Lucas's demonstration still got him every time.

He'd been on the verge of getting his way, that day half a week ago in their Council of Elrond, and still the thought of what would've happened then haunted his every step. *If they ever find out ...*

Mike shook himself, then knocked at the door; it was no good to

dwell on such fears for too long, he'd found. Waiting, Mike rubbed his hands together, then tried rubbing them across his face. Friction made warmth, and warmth was bitter needed in the crisp cold air of February. Still, when Mrs. Byers opened the door to let him in he felt only marginally warmer; his skin still felt as if it'd frozen solid while he'd biked through town, icy wind biting him with every turn of the pedals. Neither of them said more than a default greeting when Mike stepped inside.

Mike took care to close the door quickly, then paused for a moment. The air inside was thick and warm; while slipping out of his jacket he thought that he could almost feel his skin sucking in the warmth, grateful for a chance to get rid of the biting coldness. He took a moment to linger, letting his body reach something like an acceptable temperature.

"How was your day, Mike?" Now that the door was closed, it seemed Mrs. Byers felt safe enough to talk.

"Okay, I guess. School's the same as ever." Mike found that he used *as ever* surprisingly often now; mostly it was a shorthand for *still not getting better*, and the implied *forever* in there wasn't actually longer than the three months separating now from last November. Although, weirdly, sometimes it really *did* feel like there'd been nothing before that; a few vague memories were still there, but many seemed like laughable fantasy to him now.

"Will said that Dustin wanted to come over as well, later?"

"Oh yeah?" Mike said as he fumbled with his backpack, "I guess he just doesn't want to pass up a chance to steal my new X-Men comic."

"You know," Mrs. Byers said while Mike tried to open his backpack, "Last time I checked that door was pretty much sound-proof." Bent down as he was, struggling to get the zipper of the backpack open, Mike couldn't see her frown, but Mike could definitely hear it.

"What?" he said, slowly realizing that he must've been too careless when stuffing the wig in, and that now hair had gotten stuck in the zipper and was blocking it. He paused for a moment to think.

“Oh,” he said, finally understanding, “I meant an *actual* X-Men comic. Here,” he added once he’d managed to open the damned thing and get the comic out. Mrs. Byers looked thoroughly confused when he stood up and showed it to her.

Her eyebrows rose in puzzlement. “I thought you ...” she trailed off.

“I got the other one as well, of course,” he clarified, gesturing to where a few strands of light brown hair hung out the backpack. Then he took a look around the living room.

“Will’s in his room,” Mrs. Byers told him. Not that Mike was surprised, these days, Will was scarcely anywhere else; at most he could be found sitting on the couch, his face hidden behind a book. And especially today, given that Will hadn’t been at school, Mike would’ve been rather surprised to find his friend all right and healthy. Will Byers had never been one known to use little coughs or a slight ache in the stomach to get out of school. Rather, he was the opposite, turning up even when his skin was whiter than the snow outside (and that’d happened more often than Mike would’ve liked in those last three months).

Instead, El sat on the couch, and against any better judgment he took a moment to stare at her, still not quite believing this; still not quite believing that he could see her in such a normal situation, openly sitting in a living room, not hidden from the eyes of adults (at least not from those present). Even more amazing was what she was doing; the coffee table in front of her was covered in notebooks and various sheets of paper, at least some of which had a lot of childish scrawl written over them. Next to those there lay a half-eaten Eggo, now temporarily abandoned to something that El deemed more interesting (it was always temporarily, though; sooner or later she’d rediscover it and then it’d be gone in half a minute). And next to her, of course, was Mr. Clarke.

Though it had been weeks now it still felt odd, just seeing the man without his normal classroom framing him. For Mike it felt like there belonged a blackboard behind the man, or maybe the shelves of the A/V room at school. At the very least, there was normally always a desk somewhere in the room. Once he’d met him at the store, and even that had felt beyond weird to him; seeing the man sitting in

Will's living room was just not something Mike ever had expected.

Still, he was here; and with him the bag of stuff one only ever found in bags of science teachers that Mike had never before seen outside a school building as well as the inexplicable atmosphere that something important was probably going on even if he didn't know what they were talking about. Really, the only thing familiar was the man's scrawly handwriting on some of the papers. And the list, of course, the one he'd made of everything that El could do.

Half a week ago it really had just been a list, too, full of every use El had made of her powers that anyone could remember enough of, along with what strain it had had on El herself. Then Mr. Clarke had extended it with an estimation of how much energy each act had required (sparking a lengthy discussion between himself, Dustin, and Lucas, about what might be the weight of a white Hawkins-Lab van, and how high exactly El had lifted it), and quickly the whole thing had become so cluttered with estimates and calculations that it now looked like someone had tried to fit a whole year of physics class onto a single page. Then Dustin had started to extend it, gluing extra sheets of paper at it, and by now it was one monstrosity of numbers arranged in more-or-less orderly lists along with descriptions that probably no one except Mr. Clarke fully understood. Or so Mike had thought, until he'd noticed that El had added at least one entry entirely by herself.

Beneath the list of what their teacher called *data points* was a carefully drawn coordinate system with one axis labeled *energy* and the other *tiredness*, with every entry of the list above represented by a carefully drawn dot, and all dots connected by a single graph. Basically, it was just a rough line that more or less zig-zagged its way across the sheet, although it *did* show a general trend upwards; the more mass El moved, the more tired she got. Well, really, no surprise there. In any case, Mr. Clarke was more interested in whether the relation was *linear* or *quadratic* something else, which Mike hadn't really understood yet. He really had to ask Dustin to explain that to him (again).

Mike was itching to interrupt, give her the new wig and take her outside, or maybe even to his house, but he forced himself to keep quiet. El was already years behind what she was supposed to know,

and at least right now didn't look to unhappy in her position. It certainly helped having just the one teacher and basically her own class, so she got around all the bullying and misunderstandings and the other awful bits of a normal school, but it also meant she probably had the strangest curriculum, *ever*. After all, Mr. Clarke was a science teacher, and not the man of choice for an elementary school, which meant that El now had negative numbers after just a week instead of *years* (luckily she was almost as good with numbers and math as Dustin was, and had somehow actually managed to get bored with the already steep pace Mr. Clarke had originally planned) but would probably never get beyond Mr. Clarke's it's-enough-if-I-and-my-students-can-sort-of-read-it-approach to handwriting. Hers was a sort of childish, almost painted writing, one letter at a time, but the result still managed to look distinctly like the imitation of something Mike might have otherwise found scrawled beneath a returned homework assignment.

Finally Mike remembered that there were other things to do besides staring at El and contemplating her chances at a regulars school in a class with him and their friends, and forced himself grab his backpack again and walk past her into Will's room. His friend was there, already waiting, sitting on his bed in such a way that it looked like he might fall over at any second. His health had seen better times, too; in fact, he seemed almost as likely to throw up as fall over.

"Hi Will."

"Hi Mike." His voice, at least, tried its best to sound firm. "Dustin said you got it?" Mike saw the supercomm lying on the bedside table.

"Yeah. Had to buy a new one, though, Nancy actually had only the one, which we lost ..." He rummaged through his backpack for it, "It's a bit short, I think, but they only had two, and the other looked a little too much like the old one, so ... oh, I also bought the new X-Men," he added, dragging it out as well. "You want to read it?"

Will looked lost for a moment, but then broke into an almost unnervingly broad smile. "Sure," he said, "Yeah. Totally."

But Mike had already thrown it on his friend's bed and turned his

attention to El's wig, considering it. "Do you think it's more like a boy's hair? I was thinking, if she just wears some of your or my clothes with it, maybe she'd look just like one of us? I bet you they aren't looking for an extra boy."

To Mike, at least, that sounded like a pretty good plan. Will gave no indication of being convinced of it, but also didn't offer any opposition. After several awkward moments had passed, all he said was "I guess so," and then left it at that. Then he grabbed Mike's new X-Men issue, and with his face hidden behind the comic the conversation ceased.

Mike, meanwhile, started going through the heap of unordered clothing in the room in search of something warm that El could wear outside, all the while trying not to be *too* annoyed at his own mother for always making him tidy up *his* room. Will's seemed so much more comfortable, even with El's makeshift bed occupying half the floor.

"Mike? What are you *doing*?"

Will's voice snapped him out of it again, and quickly; it sounded almost as if he was panicking.

"Er ... I thought I'd search for something for El to wear outside, and since this's all just lying around anyways, I just figured ..." seeing Will's mixture of horror and fear, he quickly trailed off.

"Sorry." was all that he said instead. Will was breathing heavily.

"Look in that drawer there —" Will pointed — "but I don't think you'll find much there, either. I ... I only have one jacket, anyways, though I guess she can take that one for now. I'm not ... I'm not coming with you."

"Still too —" Mike gestured vaguely, not wanting to be too direct.

"Too sick? Yeah," Will said, "but ... just get El outside for a bit, okay?"

Mike considered that for a moment. "Without you? If you're that bad, I'm sure we could wait —"

“No. I’m fine. Well, no, I’m not fine, but like ... I’m sure El is sick of this house by now, I can’t even imagine how much, and ... just let her get a bit of fresh air, man, get her to your house. You could teach her DnD, actually; When I’m all ri ... when I’m better again, maybe we could play together?”

Mike sighed, but accepted that, no matter how wrong it felt.

Lucas and Dustin finally showed up not too long after Mr. Clarke had declared El’s lessons done for the day, and barely a minute after the teacher was gone the living room was lost in a frenzy of activity.

El already wore some of Will’s clothes, so that wasn’t much of a problem; but now that her hair wasn’t quite as short as it’d been before getting it all under the wig turned out to be a surprisingly difficult problem.

Initially Mike hadn’t thought too much about it, he’d just put the thing squarely on top of El’s hair and thought that that was it. She still looked undeniably like a girl, at least from up close; but if one couldn’t see her face ... Mike guessed that with the light-brown wig she could pass as Will if seen from distance. Realizing he was staring, Mike tried to start talking.

“Sorry I didn’t really say hello before,” he stumbled, and was on the verge of continuing when Dustin —

“Ah, Mike? You do know that there’s still black hair coming out from under the wig, right?”

Damn you, Dustin, I was just talking to El! But walking around her to see what he meant, it was undeniably true. The back of her head was obviously fake, with strands of black curls coming out from under the wig.

Mike tried dragging the wig back until every last scrap of that was

covered. Except now her forehead wasn't covered at all anymore. Once he'd corrected that, the whole thing was sort of tilted, and now her right ear had a frame of short black hair. He tried it again. And then again.

All through this, El herself looked increasingly amused. In fact, she gave the distinct impression of someone who was trying very hard not to laugh without really succeeding.

"That's not funny!" he told her, but was by then on the verge of laughing himself, if only to so he wouldn't be too frustrated. Finally Dustin deigned to help him, and together they managed to get it right.

Somewhere in the middle of all that Jonathan had come home from work, and apparently started discussing something with Lucas. Mike just called a short "Hello Jonathan!" in his general direction once he'd noticed that Will's brother was there, then got the jacket Will had mentioned and tried hard not to think about how it was the same red jacket he'd worn that fateful day when he'd told him the roll was a seven.

He wasn't sure if El recognized it as that, or if she cared much about that if so; and really, why should it be a big deal? It was still just some jacket. Except Mike couldn't help but think of anything else when he saw it. And it didn't help that Will wouldn't leave the house, now, and only ever went anywhere when Jonathan or his mum could drive him there in the safety of a car; of course Mike understood why, but it also meant he rarely saw Will in that jacket, and now had almost no memory that he might've used to get rid of thoughts about that one evening three months ago.

Well, he thought, he'd just have to deal with that; after all, they were here to get *El* outside, not him.

And with both jacket and wig on her, El *did* look a little like Will. Or, well, to Mike she was obviously still El but in a wig and with Will's red jacket on, but he guessed if one didn't know her too well, and didn't get too good a look at her ...

"Mike?" Lucas broke in his thoughts.

“Yeah?”

“Jonathan says he could drive us to your house. Minimizes the time that we’re exposed completely.”

Yeah, sure ... oh, wait, what? Mike’d thought they’d just take the bikes, like they’d done last time ... only, he had to admit that Lucas’s argument did make sense. Still, he’d actually been looking forwards to having El on the back of his bike again, maybe even taking the shortcut to Mirkwood, so she’d get to see the forest ...

“Okay.” He couldn’t quite keep it from becoming a sigh.

Really, the only difficult part was getting past his mum. Or actually it would’ve been getting past *both* of his parents, had his dad cared even just a bit about whatever it was that his son did with his day. Well, he did care, but just enough to make weird and mostly unwanted comments about his children’s behavior at dinner. Or about politics, that too. Mostly Mike didn’t listen; the first kind of comments weren’t helpful anyways, and the second kind he really hadn’t been able to stand for the last three months. Before they’d just been annoying, but now ... well, Mike tried not to hear them.

His mum, meanwhile, might actually ask who this new friend was that he’d brought along, should she realized that it wasn’t Will. At least she’d never met El.

Still, Mike felt anxious and even slightly fearful as his mother opened the door. Why couldn’t he just have his own key?

“Hello Mike, you back home?”

“Ah, yes ... er, Hi mum.” He was stumbling over words, almost stuttering, he realized. Panic rose a little, then seemed to sit back again but with an expression that clearly said *I’ll be with you in a second!*

“Ah, I brought a couple of friends with me, is that okay?”

“Sure. Are they staying for dinner?”

“Y— No.” Shit, he’d almost said yes before catching himself. Obviously El couldn’t stay for dinner, that’d be a disaster.

“Well, come in, then,” his mum said, her eyes glancing above his head. Mike fought the urge to look; Dustin was just slightly behind them, then came Lucas (the tallest of them), right next to him Jonathan, who’d gotten out of the car specifically for that reason. El stood behind all of them.

“I’ll come and collect them again in an hour or two,” Jonathan told his mum. Maybe he felt like his presence would be weird otherwise.

Trying hard not to fidget, Mike led them inside, going straight for the door to the basement. Dustin followed him, and then Lucas, and —

“Actually, is Nancy here?” Jonathan asked his mum.

“Ah, I think so,” she said, distracted and in thoughts for just a moment, and El slipped through behind her, reaching the door just as Mike’s mum shouted “*Nancy?*”

El was halfway down the stairs when a distant “yes?” came down from Nancy’s room upstairs.

Thanks a lot, Mike mouthed at Jonathan when the guy walked past him, on his way up to Nancy’s room. Then Mike went down the stairs as well, taking care to properly close the door behind him. His mum wasn’t one to come in unannounced; they’d be undisturbed for as long as they wanted to stay, except if it was long enough to collide with dinner. Mike glanced at a clock. Two hours left. *Great.*

Walking down the familiar steps, seeing that El had thrown herself into the old blanket fort while both Dustin and Lucas were already setting up the DnD board, Will’s words rang in his ears: *You could teach her DnD, actually; When I’m better again, maybe we could all play together?*

Yeah, he thought, *we’ll do exactly that.*

El was reluctant at first, but also seemed determined to understand this strange new game. Mike found he enjoyed teaching her, and from Dustin's and Lucas's constant joking, they did, too.

They sat there for almost an hour, going through rules and example scenarios, undisturbed except once when all their assembled supercomms decided to crack at the same moment, but when they tried calling back no one seemed to be there after all. El seemed relaxed, being back in this still-familiar house, and together they all hoped Will got better soon, so that he could join them here again.

Little did they suspect what would come next.

Notes for the Chapter:

(in case anyone's wondering about the whole deal with Mr. Clarke and the list; I originally thought I could do something where he'd find an application of El's powers that she herself hadn't thought of, before I noticed that to explain that I'd actually have to come up with rules as to how all that works, which, it turns out, is *hard*)

Also, as might be guessed from the last line, the next few chapters will have a lot more action stuff in them than the last ones.

Hope you liked the read,

Gazyrlezon.

10. Scott Clarke

Scott Clarke spent the afternoon collecting and confirming data in the fields around Hawkins. He hadn't really what Dustin and Lucas had found, of course, but now that he was back in what he thought of as his researcher-mode — which he hadn't been in years — the single most important thing seemed to be double-checking. *Like a field version of peer review, if you like.*

Scott knew that shouldn't fool himself into anything here, of course; he'd never really been *in the field* (except now he was, and literally at that; and the single largest problem he seemed to have was that it made his feet freeze inside his boots); the last time he'd "researched" something it had been a lab experiment for students at university, and with foregone conclusion. Had been fun, though. They'd thrown down various objects from university buildings, measuring time and height each time, and then tried to get to Newton, just through looking for patterns in the data. It had probably been the single most inaccurate G in that equation ever, but they'd managed it.

So now he was here, in his winter coat and in entirely inappropriate boots (he wasn't in the habit of hiking, especially not during cold weather, and consequently didn't own any boots that would've kept his feet warm for longer than half an hour), running up and down a frozen wheat field.

He'd asked to borrow Dustin's map of field lines after their discussion and gotten it; He'd promised to return it the next day, though Dustin had said that in any case Lucas had a second, identical one. Then he'd forced himself not to abandon his post and go through the rest of the day as teacher, but after that there'd been no holding him back. There was an unexplained large magnetic field practically in his back yard, and the scientist in him was itching for more knowledge. Of course he knew that anything involving a fourth dimension in space was associated with where Will had been stuck for a week. Lovecraft might've once said that fear was a human's strongest emotion; but in the last few hours, Scott Clarke had found he rather strongly disagreed with him. *Curiosity* was stronger, he thought, at least with him.

So he'd gone to the physics room, borrowed himself the Hall Sensor he'd normally use for demonstrations in higher classes, a compass, and set out. He'd parked his car just next to the field, and now chased the magnetic field lines with compass and sensor in hand.

Well, that and the battery pack, otherwise the Hall Sensor wouldn't tell him anything about the strength of the magnetic field. Vaguely Scott hoped that, to a random onlooker, he'd look a little like a member of a USS Enterprise ground team, with the stick of the Hall Probe in one hand, holding it out into nothing, and the battery pack with display a tricorder to match it. Although he guessed it was probably more likely that he'd look like some maniac with a stick and a clunky black stone freezing his ass off. And the last part of that, he considered, was definitely true.

Some things he'd already discovered; unlike Lucas or Dustin he something to measure the strength of the magnetic field as well as direction. And it wasn't weak, either; right now, the display stood at $430\mu\text{T}$, greater than the Earth's own field by a factor of almost a hundred. That was still not nearly enough to move anything, of course; but the number steadily increased as he neared the imagined center, the north pole of this field (well, at least the closest he could get to the pole without going sideways into another dimension). So far, so obvious; of course it was stronger than the Earth's own (or else it wouldn't show up on a compass), and that it got stronger the closer to the center he got was trivial. If his theory was correct, he was just getting closer to one of the field's poles, and a magnetic pole was really just the point where the field was at its strongest.

But he'd also, he was pretty sure, dispelled any last doubt of where the field *came* from. If someone'd really just hid a very strong magnet in the ground, then, well, his compass should turn *downwards* when turned sideways. It hadn't yet, and Scott doubted it would even when he reached the center. Because that was where he was going; at the very least, he'd be able to complete Dustin's map a little once he knew its position.

No, the compass didn't turn when he turned it sideways. For that to happen, he'd have to turn it *sideways*, true, but *sideways* into an entirely different direction, which his strictly three-dimensional self had found quite impossible to do.

So all he could do was to map out the field, add little arrows on Dustin's map every once in a while, and otherwise continue his way towards what he might call *approximation point*. The point where the pole was *closest* to him. Like some mad wanderer on a pilgrimage he slowly made his way, and nevermind frozen feet or the cough he seemed to be developing.

At the Approximation Point (he'd decided to call it that; the point where he'd be closest to the *actual* pole, somewhere out in a different direction that he couldn't go in) Scott Clarke found a single tree, standing there between two frozen and snow-covered wheat fields like some sinister tower reaching out towards the sky, looming against a gray and cold sky.

For a moment Scott stopped dead in his tracks and stared at it, before adding a mark on the map in what he hoped was about the correct position, and next to it the current reading of his Hall Sensor. About 700 μ T. *Wait. What was that?*

Scott Clarke waited nearly ten minutes before he was sure of what he'd seen, ten minutes with freezing wind thrashing into him. Slowly, ever so slowly, the field was still *getting* stronger. It was hard to see, given that this was more a toy than an actual scientific instrument which produced results only dimly near the actual correct value and would fluctuate around even if he held the probe completely still, but the effect was there sure enough. The magnetic field wasn't just there. It was increasing. Not near as fast as when he'd walked through it, true, but what he saw was undeniable. And he could think of only one obvious explanation for that.

It's getting closer. Closer to ... well, everything. To the Earth's 3D-slice of that apparently much larger world existing around it (*4D or higher?* he wondered, *and is it euclidean? God I hope it is, I never could imagine non-euclidean geometry* ...). For a moment all he could feel was dread, and suddenly he wasn't sure about that Lovecraft quote at all anymore. Maybe that old racist *had* gotten the truth of it, after all.

Scott Clarke stood still on a field outside Hawkins, icy wind biting into his flesh, staring at an inexplicable black leafless tree that he only now realized shouldn't be here. Farmers didn't normally let trees grow on their fields.

And with that curiosity won out again, and he simply added an arrow on Dustin's map, behind the number he'd written next to the little dot marking the Approximation Point. An arrow pointing upwards, indicating that this value was steadily increasing. Then he put the map away, and stepped further to the tree.

At first glance it had seemed normal enough, but now ... *What if it's already arriving?* some voice whispered in his head, *what if this is not a tree at all, but the spearhead of El's monster?*

A shiver ran over him, but he slowly walked closer to the thing nonetheless. From up close, it still looked solid enough, if a bit darker than most trees, but ... *oh*, the ground around it! Maybe two feet from the trunk it fell away and revealed a hole going down deep, and in the hole the tree's root, gnarly, reaching across the gap. Spiderweb-like as they looked, once he'd gotten a glimpse at what was beneath they seemed almost like a shield.

Scott Clarke stared down. *Fear, or curiosity?*

For a moment he hesitated, but his choice was as clear as it'd ever been. He might not be an athlete, but for this it should be enough. Slowly, he descended into the hole, climbing down on the bare roots of the tree, ripping holes into the thick meshwork of the thinner ones, and to what was below.

Only, it wasn't below the tree at all. While he drew his scarf up to make a rudimentary shield against whatever might be floating in the air here, Scott saw that he'd come through a sort of circular portal around where the tree-top might be.

A doorway. It had been a while since he'd said that, since he'd struck that pen through the paper plate at Will Byer's funeral, but that was undoubtedly what he saw here, only this time it was in real life and not on a paper plate. Looking up, through a circular ring, he could see the sky shimmering through a network of webby, dirty roots, blue and familiar. But all around it ... well, DnD's Vale of Shadows was as good an analogy as any, he thought. In the center was still a tree, of sorts; only it was not the same one that he'd seen in the above.

No, he corrected himself, *not back above, back on Earth.*

Dimly, he realized that the existence of portals probably meant that the universe was even less euclidean than even Einstein had thought. *Shit*. Sometimes all that weird geometry in physics really annoyed him ... but he pushed that to the back of his mind, for a moment, and considered the thing that grew in place of the tree, here.

It still grew straight up, not through the circular portal all around it but through a hole in *that*, and then upwards and towards a sky as bleak as any sky could ever be. If it even was a tree. It lacked branches, for one thing, instead being a single thick trunk that continued straight up until it was out of sight, vanishing into the fog hanging above this desolate land. Here, it really *did* seem like a tower. Furthermore, it seemed to be *alive*, and not alive in the sense how trees normally were. It *moved*. Not much. Just slightly. It didn't go anywhere; the trunk remained in its place, but ... it seemed to *fluctuate*. A hard-to-see vibration of what one might call the bark, moving up and down in a slowly, shivering sort of motion. For some reason, it made Scott Clarke think of a hundred thousand spiders all spinning one gigantic net towards the sky together; the vibrations on a thing like that might move the way this surface did.

Almost he was too repulsed to step closer. But light here in this slice of the universe was scarce, and no matter what this thing was, he still wanted to see, still wanted to *know*. He moved towards it.

If anything, the eerie strangeness of it intensified. This wasn't *vibration*, not how he'd thought; this wasn't just something moving to and fro, this was ... it took Scott a while to realize what he was looking at, but the answer appeared inescapable.

This thing, whatever it was, it was not moving, at least not within this level of the world. It was *passing through*. His senses could only see three dimensions of space, and by now Scott felt that he could be sure of the existence of at least a fourth. This sort of inexplicable motion, this sort of bumpy waves along a surface, these were exactly the sort of inexplicable non-motions that a higher-dimensional object made while passing through a lower one, like a cube passing corner-first through a flat plane, which would first be a triangle that grew, then a confusing irregular hexagon and then a shrinking triangle again before it disappeared entirely. Little bits of it constantly seemed to grow out, split up, recombine with other spikes to then disappear

again. This thing, this monster that El had warned them of, it wouldn't come through a portal. It came the long way round.

The portal Scott had taken was merely a shortcut; this monstrous being apparently had no patience for those. It just went through whatever lay between this part of the universe, this Vale of Shadows, and the Earth itself. Numbly, Scott Clarke thought he dearly needed a new nomenclature to think about this greater universe. *A problem for another time.*

This thing was on its way already, and well underway by now, too. Scott checked his Hall sensor, and found that the battery pack tried hard to escape his grip, and though the display said zero, that was probably because it was just off the scale now.

Scared, he considered what to do. Go home, warn the others? Call a meeting of their Council of Elrond?

No. Not yet. One data point was not much, and he might still be wrong. Assuming that passing through the doorway hadn't skewed with directions, he knew where another local center might be on Earth. Another Approximation Point. If it was in the same place here as well, then ... then he didn't know what. He'd think about that once he'd reached it.

Nimbly, Scott Clarke turned on his boots and began to walk again, his scarf drawn up to filter the horrible air at least a bit. It was warmer here than it had been on his Earth during winter, but that didn't mean it was any more comfortable. The field was there just as it was on the other side, but once he got to the town, with all the houses overgrown, chocked in the grip of hideous, repulsing plant-like growth ...

It should be about three miles, he believed, three miles through what his students had quite fittingly once called an *evil dimension*.

Walking, he'd hoped so hard to be wrong, that all this was the result of too much interpretation from too little data, that he almost couldn't believe what he found at the other point.

Here was another portal, and another mile-high tower (he'd stopped thinking of those *things* as trees) slowly moving through that fourth spacial dimension that he couldn't see. All he could see was the ordinary three ones, though those were horrible enough in these parts. En route he'd passed through a dead forest, and seen a cracked egg the size of a trashcan on the ground, shivering at the thought of what it might've given birth to. For the most part, though, he hadn't thought much about what was around him, just about where he was going. Hoping he wouldn't find another not-tree there, hoping there wouldn't be another tower of terror waiting for him there, vanishing miles above him in a fog dimly lit by red lights that he couldn't put a name to.

It must've been minutes that he'd spent just staring at it, minutes spent thinking *No* over and over again before he even noticed the ladder. It just stood there, vanishing maybe ten feet above ground through what he guessed must be another doorway, another portal. Carefully stepping closer and risking a look up, he saw what looked like the interior of a building.

Oh, God be thanked, he thought. If there was a ladder here, something so distinctly human, than there was someone else who knew about all this, and maybe someone who'd know how to deal with it. Grateful at being able to shift that responsibility to someone else, Scott Clarke climbed the ladder without thinking twice about who it might be.

He'd forever been more of a theorist than someone conducting serious experiments, after all, and no one needed many safety precautions when throwing little weights off from university buildings. Such petty things like collateral damage had never been an issue with things like that; and not once in this afternoon he had so far consciously thought of imminent danger to *himself*, only ever to the Earth as a whole.

Once he realized where he was, he did. But that would yet take him a while, and by then he was deep inside the complex.

The corridors and hallways of Hawkins Lab lay silent. Apparently, no one had noticed him so far.

Mindless fool! What were you thinking, stumbling into this blind? How many highly equipped research facilities are there three miles within Hawkins that have a good chance of knowing about this?

He'd tried blaming it on Dustin's map, but of course that didn't work. Maybe the map didn't show secret government research stations, true, but given whom he'd homeschooled these last few weeks he really, *really* should have thought of it by himself. Well, he hadn't, and now he better try and get out of this again, and as fast as he could. Slowly, as sneakily as he could manage, he backtracked his steps. Down this corridor, and then ... had he come from the right or the left? Apart from the corruption covering the walls, the tendrils of plants stretching seemingly through the entire complex, those hallways all looked the same.

Scott had no time left to wonder, though.

"You won't find him here," a voice said, and Scott Clarke's best description of how it sounded would be *disgust*. He turned around, and saw a man in a white lab coat standing behind him, watching, with not the faintest hint of being nervous. Well, why should he? Behind him Scott could make out at least three armed guards in black vests, presumably bullet-proof, guns at the ready as if he were a known communist spy.

"Who?" He asked it in his best teacher's voice. A teacher was normally good at covering up his own emotions, after all, although this time a little of the fear that he felt beating in his chest slipped through all the same. And his puzzlement, too, because he really had not even the faintest idea what the man in white was talking about. Here he was, in a strange, overgrown hallway of a secret government organization, and got told something that seemed to lack any

meaning at all.

“Aww, don’t pretend you don’t know who. Funny, really, is that all you got? Teacher to the rescue?” For a moment the man paused in his mocking, just long enough for Scott to remember a schoolyard long ago, and the bullies there who’d come to pick on a little boy up to his nose in science ... *You’re above that, now*, he told himself, *You do not cower in fear before them anymore, you call them in and have them give an apology to their victims, or else have them in detention.*

“I’m disappointed,” the man went on while Scott was feverishly thinking about whom he wouldn’t find here. Had found out about El, and taken her back? But the man had said *him* ... “*really*, I am. I thought you’d understand what all this is for, but ... ” he trailed off.

“What all this is *for*?” Anger now rushed through him, anger he’d so long had to hold back at how these things were done, anger replacing every last scrap of fear that Scott Clarke had felt before. When he opened his mouth again, he was shouting. “*What’s this for, huh? For science?*” He was beyond simple fury now, this was him taking what stand he could still make. “*This is not for science, this is an institution specializing in the torture of children above anything else!*”

“Another fanatic,” the man in white muttered. He might think himself a scientist, but Scott Clarke would die before calling him that, even within his own mind.

The man winked for the guards behind him.

Him, Scott realized. *Will, they’ve taken Will, they’ve ...*

As the guards came running, Scott Clarke reflected that he seldom wished he were Mrs. Andros, but right in that moment he did. If it’d been her here, she could’ve whipped up that astonishing voice into a series of chastisements so brutal that would let even these men cover in fear, maybe even the man in white who commanded them. Alas, he was not Mrs. Andros, and he had no way to stop them, either.

When one of them shot him, his last thought before dipping out was that he would’ve expected more blood, but then he was gone.

Notes for the Chapter:

Scott Clarke is both really hard and really easy to write, it turns out. The last chapter with him was fun, me speculating about a teacher's usual day, but this one ... dear Lord, I feel like I used to be better at the Lovecraftian stuff. I also actually went to wikipedia and looked up how strong the Earth's magnetic field is, usually (that stuff was too long ago, really, my last few years of physics at school were fun — the class had about ten to fifteen students, and a seriously good teacher — but since I haven't used much of that lately, I find I'm slowly forgetting all that stuff. I used to be able to calculate energy released in nuclear reactions, but now ... instead, I now know what an affine plane is, but I felt putting references to that in would be both unrealistic for a middle school physics teacher and a bit too much with the maths references).

Any thoughts on the chapter? Anyone here know what an affine plane is and/or wants me to put that in?

Hope you still liked it,

Gazyrlezon.

Edit: made a mistake, that should be affine space, not plane, those have only got two dimensions, and for this I'd need four at the very least.

11. Jonathan

Walking up the stairs, Jonathan could feel a familiar sort of anxiety come over him again. *You don't belong here*, it seemed to whisper, *you're not one of the cool kids, you've got no right to even talk to a girl like her, let alone visit her room.*

He wished that voice would just shut up already; had done so for these last three months, and yet it was still there, persisting. Problem was, really, the only way to get rid of it was to remember what had changed in the first place, and he didn't want that, either. Jonathan felt like he was perpetually stuck between two lives, knowing he'd had to make them work together at some point but continually failing to do so.

Should I stay, or should I go? That question seemed to turn up a lot, recently. Should he face this strange life, or would he shy away again, the way he so often did? Except he was already here now. Decision done for the day, and he wasn't going away, *so just quit that already!* Sometimes (*often*) it felt as if his mind was split into two or even more parts, with Jonathan himself being ground up between them. As if he had to fight to go forwards, against his own head.

But he reached the top of the stairs his mind settled on other matters once he got closer to Nancy's bedroom door. Not that those were any easier to think about. *No*, he finally decided, it didn't change anything that El was downstairs with her friends; he might not like keeping Nancy in the dark, but the Council's decision had been to let Mike tell her should he ever want to. And at least the last time he'd been here she hadn't known yet.

He wondered about that a little; after all, Mike had actually been in favor of telling her at first. On the other hand, if there was one thing that his life was full of it was sheer anxiety murdering his ability to speak, so maybe he shouldn't be one to judge.

He knocked on the door. "Nancy? It's me," he called through. Jonathan tried hard not to think about that night at Steve's house, where he'd taken the pictures, uninvited. Better ask first.

“Come in.”

Opening the door, he stopped for a moment, needing a moment to take this in. Nancy’s room was a bright screaming pink all over; every last inch so completely different to his own home. The whole thing was so enormously much brighter than his own life he kept expecting that it would just seep into him and brighten him up a little as well. It never did, though; if anything, it made him all the more gloomy.

Maybe it was because he couldn’t see this room without remembering the first time he’d been there. And once that thought got inside his head, one thing led to another, and suddenly he had to deal with the image of that monster, of the Demagorgon, lying on top of him, disgusting goo spilling over his face and dripping down deep into his mouth. Sometimes he wished she’d just paint it some other color, just to make it look *different*.

Quit that! Quit dwelling on it all the time, that doesn’t do anyone any good!

Yeah, well. Try ask him to not think about something, sure. That would work.

“Hey.” For a short moment something almost like love for her overwhelmed him; she’d done it, broken him out of that. Then he realized that that was probably silly, and tried to get rid of that thought as well. Worked perfectly, of course.

“Hey,” he said, “I ah ... I just drove Mike and some friends here, and I thought, well, since I’m here maybe —”

“Yeah. Sure.” Nancy went over to her desk, then rummaged in a drawer beneath it. Finally she dragged out the map that the three of them made, together with an ever-increasing stack of notes on everything which Steve’d dubbed her *log*.

Both of them sat down, Nancy on the chair and Jonathan on the bed slightly behind her. It still made him distinctly uncomfortable, but at least he could now sit down here on his own without Nancy asking him, confused, why he stood around like that.

“So, what have you got?” She was always like that now, business-like, almost cold. While Jonathan related his observations on the gates from memory, she carefully added entries to both the log and the map.

That was her way of coping, he guessed; if Nancy Wheeler couldn’t understand something she’d turn it into figures and scrawled notes on papers, every last detail recorded as if she’d have to study it for an exam. And he could see the point of it as well; this wasn’t just random details or speculation what she’d gathered, far from it. On those papers she’d recorded the location of every gate they’d found in and around Hawkins, *when* they had discovered it, how large it was, if it had appeared to be growing or shrinking, each one a dot of paper and an entry in the log. And she hadn’t stopped there, either; now she visited each of them regularly, checking if they were still there and if their size had changed. There was only one gate that Jonathan knew she had missed (and which he couldn’t tell her about), and that was the one El must’ve used to get back.

Right now the list included well over forty-eight active portals, twenty-nine of them in the woods (and twenty of those in the direct vicinity of “Mirkwood”), and of the nineteen remaining ones a full ten were inside the school building, often hidden behind cabinets, seemingly just black spots no one had cleaned in a while. ID numbers were steadily rising, too; most of the portals weren’t there for long, and the last one Nancy had given the number one-hundred-and-thirty-six.

Nancy had started this almost directly after the events of that week in November; by the time Jonathan had joined her shortly after Christmas Steve had already begun to help her with whenever he could. By now, again almost two months later, it felt a little as if they’d gotten stuck in some loop that had forced the three of them back together again. Jonathan hadn’t really expected that; after everything, he’d been surprised that Steve didn’t just get as far away from him as humanly possible instead of meeting him meet during lunch breaks and then once a week at Nancy’s house.

But if nothing else, it gave him something to do with what little time he had free between school and work, something keeping that time free from unpleasant thoughts of flashing lights and liquid goo

coming down his throat. And a reason to talk to Nancy, that as well. Not that that was something he'd really admit, or even thought about.

Jonathan rummaged through he school bag for the photos he'd made. There weren't many, and those were of mostly of poor quality, both because he always got nervous in the darkroom nowadays — no, those weren't pictures of Nancy that he'd had no right to take, but should anyone ask him explanations would still be more than simply hard — and because something about the gateways themselves seemed to refuse his camera. Try as he might, he'd never managed to take a single picture of them that he could be satisfied with; they were always just out of focus, or overexposed, or too dark. They never looked *good*, and it was a point of personal frustration to Jonathan that he had no idea why. It didn't change no matter how he calibrated the camera, either; it seemed simply impossible to get a clear image of the things on picture.

Still, he had a stack of them, maybe six or seven, taken during the last week or so. Nancy kept those in a box, together with the log and the map. No, wait ... rummaging around his bag, Jonathan found that there were five extra pictures.

Ah. He'd almost forgotten about those; he'd made five of them, in the end, five photographs all showing El, happy, stuffing an Eggo into her mouth. He'd have to remember giving her those, but for now they went back into the bag. The others he gave Nancy, together with a page of his notebook where he'd written down his notes on every portal he'd found during his last trip through the woods.

"Two of them are new," he told her, "I took a picture of one of them. Ah ... here." Jonathan pointed at where she'd laid them on her desk.

"Okay, so I'll make that portal number one-hundred-and-forty and one-hundred-and-forty-one ..." She busily copied his notes on it, as businesslike as if she was making cards in preparation for some exam, then took a look at the other things he'd written down. "Number ninety-three has vanished ..." She added another line to the log, then took an eraser and removed it from the map.

"You found some others?" The last time he'd been there, ID numbers

had been lower.

“Yeah, I found two, and Steve came by at lunch, he had another two, and an old one that had vanished.”

She completed the log, wrote that two new had been found and one vanished. Total number of active portals was now fifty-eight.

“That’s the fourth time in a row that I do an update and the total increases,” she commented.

“You think we’re getting more portals?”

Nancy considered for a moment. “Short term, definitely. Long term ... I dunno, maybe it’s just a periodical thing and it’ll decrease and then increase again. You know sunspots? Their number’s got an eleven-year cycle, so maybe this is similar, but ... I really can’t say.”

Jonathan grunted noncommittally. No, he hadn’t known that, but he guessed it might make sense. Or maybe they were both refusing to accept that the number of portals might just really be rising, that something ...

He tried his best not to think about what El and Lucas had said during the last meeting of Elrond’s Council. Damn him, but this was meant to *distract* him from what else had happened, not to remind him of it!

God, what had happened? Normally he’d easily spend hours in here with Nancy, and occasionally with Steve, too; their conversation would drift off onto some other topic, and then further from there as if it was the most natural thing, and for a few hours Jonathan could delude himself into thinking that he wasn’t just that weird guy whom no one save his mother and brother liked. He’d just sit there with them, talk, and not be ashamed of himself every time someone spoke to him in turn.

You know what’s happened, some cruel voice cut through his mind, you know there’s something out there coming for all of you, and you’ve just found something that looks like proof, and now you’re fucking shitting yourself, trying not to panic! That’s what happened!

Shuddering a little, Jonathan realized it was true. He *was* trying very hard not to panic, and he didn't yet know if he'd succeed. What to do?

He couldn't panic in here. Nancy would understand, probably, but this was meant to help her deal with all this shit, too. Dragging his problems in here wouldn't help anyone, least of all her. Numbly, Jonathan realized he could hear his own heartbeat thumping in his ears. Shit, he really *was* panicking, then. *Okay*, he thought, *for a start, take a deep breath, maybe that helps. Breath in, slowly — yeah, that's good — then out again. Okay. You're doing okay. Now. You have to get out of here, and fast. No time to linger.*

Okay. Jonathan took another deep breath, and tried hard to keep his voice normal.

"That's all I've got, for today," he said, then stood up and more or less fled the room. He could feel her giving him an odd look as he opened the door, managed a quick "bye," but didn't even wait to see if she'd say something in return before he closed the door.

Whew, okay. A quick glance around showed him he was alone here, but still; someone might burst out one of the doors at any moment. Down the stairs, then. Across the living room. Jonathan was almost running by then. Mrs. Wheeler sat there on the couch and looked up when she saw him.

"Oh, you're leaving already?" Damn it, why did she have to know how long he was normally here? Jonathan did his best to walk faster, leaving a perplexed Mrs. Wheeler behind.

"Did something happen? Did —" but he couldn't hear what she said next anymore; he'd already closed the door and was now sprinting down towards his car. He got in, closed the door.

Okay, he told himself. *No reason to panic. There's an evil monster coming to get you and all your friends, but that's not a reason to fall into panic!* Well, maybe it helped a little. Still shivering, he started the engine. He wasn't sure if it was safe for him to drive in this state, but it gave him something to do. He could grip the steering wheel with his hands, that gave him something to hold onto.

Tires screeching, he drove off. Towards home. There he could get into his room, get the headphones on, have the Clash playing and then maybe he'd get better. Yeah. Sounded as good a plan as any.

When he got there, at first he didn't get that there was anything odd. He didn't notice that there wasn't any light in the windows, though the sun had slowly begun to set.

Jonathan didn't pay attention to that. He didn't notice that there was no one to answer the door, either, because he didn't knock on it; unlocking it himself was faster, and if there was any word to describe his current state of mind, then that word was *desperate*.

Even opening the door he still didn't really notice what was wrong. Only when rushing through the front room did he realize that there was no one there. It still took him almost to his room before his brain actually registered that information, and then suddenly he stopped dead in his tracks.

He went back to the front room.

It was empty.

Jonathan stood there and stared, unable to think. Shaking, he turned around. The kitchen, too, was empty.

Then, as if he was dying of thirst and had just spied a bottle of nice, clean, fresh water in the distance, he sprinted over to the dining table, which looked *wrong*, though he didn't know why, and then to the kitchen. Something there was missing. Feverishly he ripped out one drawer after the other, until he found what he'd been searching for, unknowingly, and stopped dead.

Oh fucking Hell, man!

Huh. That felt almost like something that Steve might've said. Well,

Jonathan guessed he could use some of Steve's swearing right now, he was certainly at loss on how to describe his situation.

Inside the drawer was a stack of drawings Will had made, *before*, the stack that he hadn't seen on the table where it normally lay.

Not yet really comprehending, Jonathan stared at it. This was one of the codes they'd made up after the first Elrond's Council meeting: the stack of paintings meant *Will*, and this particular drawer meant *Hawkins Lab*. And now he'd found one inside the other.

Abducted, he made the connection, and then, *mum must've been taken with him, or gone willingly so that he wouldn't be alone*.

Yeah, that must be it. He could understand, he guessed, what had happened, on a sort of intellectual level. Looking through the window, Jonathan could see deep tracks that those vans must've left behind. It felt like he'd just solved a particularly hard homework, maybe some stupid maths problem or something.

For several moments he was deathly calm. Then suddenly the implications of it all began to kick in; suddenly Jonathan understood what this all meant. Suddenly it wasn't just an abstract thought anymore. Will, and his mum, gone, prisoners of Hawkins Lab. *Gone*. His mother wouldn't have left this behind otherwise.

It struck him like thunder. *Gone*. Slowly, he realized he was shaking, his hand shivering; his legs shuddered, and if he didn't sit down somewhere fast then in a few moments he'd probably fall over and on the ground. *Gone!*

Comprehension now fully pressing in on him with all its weight, Jonathan frantically fled into his room.

When he had his eyes closed and the headphones on, Jonathan could pretend there was nothing else in the world. The Clash seeped

through his brain and mind, and for some minutes nothing else was there. For some minutes, he was almost calm, the way a pot of boiling mild seemed calm just before it spilled over.

Know Your Rights had already passed over him. He knew every word of it, of course, but its essential anger and hopelessness still got to him. Somehow, it felt like him, right now. *Car Jamming* had come and gone without much thought from his side shortly after that.

And next, then, came what he'd both hoped for and feared.

Darling you've got to let me know, the words thumped into his ears.

Should I stay or should I go?

This was it, he guessed. He'd never hear that song again without thinking about Will, without thinking about everything that'd happened. He'd known that long ago, of course; but strangely, he'd found, whenever he listened to those words he got more confident.

As the song crept further and further along, Jonathan slowly resurfaced from his catatonic state of burial deep inside himself.

Should I stay or should I go now?

Should I stay or should I go now?

What a question. Such a fundamental struggle, how was he ever supposed to have an answer?

This indecision's buggin' me, the words came.

Yeah, it sure did, he thought, tears in his eyes, his face a mask of pain.

The song went on. Jonathan was lost in his mind.

No, he finally concluded. *The decision should be clear*. He had to get up. He *had* to tell someone, Nancy, Steve, Mike, *El*. Anyone. He had to go.

Only ... it seemed so damned hard to pull himself back up again. He was ... Jonathan was tired beyond measure. It all seemed much too

much. He let the next part of the song rush by him without much notice.

If I go there will be trouble, it whirled into his ears. And what a cosmic truth that was!

And if I stay it will be double.

Shit. Yeah. That was certainly true as well. *Oh, just fuck it!* That almost sounded like Steve's voice, again.

By the time the song was through Jonathan knew what he had to do, and stopped the record player. Then he dragged himself into a sitting position. Another moment, then he stood up. For a moment he staggered, but then found a balance.

Walking to the front room, his steps left an empty, hollow sound behind them. The house wasn't just empty, it *felt* empty, too, almost abandoned. Stepping out the house, Jonathan was careful to lock the door.

Outside he took a long, deep breath of cold air, hoping it would serve to wake him up again. The sun had almost completely set by now; the town and forest lay in shadowy red twilight. Beautiful, but he did not stop to take the sight in.

Instead he got into his car, and started the engine again. Rumbling, the car came to life, and Jonathan let it screech out the driveway.

Towards Nancy's house. Towards Mike, Lucas, Dustin, and El. They had to know.

And they had to know *now*, with not a moment lost.

Notes for the Chapter:

Jonathan's a strange one to write, but also easy. He feels surprisingly familiar, to me, like an older version of awkward fourteen-year-old me. It went a lot better than I'd expected it would, given that I'm normally bad at writing my favourite characters ...

Also, two chapters in a single day! (okay, well, not actually. I had drafts of both of them beforehand, and noticed that if I kept going with one chapter a day I wouldn't finish this before Season 2 comes out, which is *next Friday*, I still can't really believe that!)

Thoughts on this chapter? Thoughts on (my) Jonathan?

12. Nancy

What? That was Nancy's first thought after her friend had left the room. No, not left; Jonathan had literally *fled* the room. With just ... no word of explanation. Just a mumbled *bye*, and then he'd been gone, door thrown closed behind him.

It took her a moment to fully process that. Then she sighed.

Jonathan, I thought we were past this by now. It was more annoyance than anything else, really. Befriending, or even just keeping in contact with someone who'd been the school loner and self-admitted part-time creep never would've been easy, she knew that, but ... this felt disappointingly like slipping back into that. Suddenly it seemed as if he was the outsider again, socially anxious to a fault, while she sat here, safe in her nice sweet pink room and wondered what might be going on in that weird guy's head.

You can trust me, Jonathan!

But of course he wasn't here anymore. She wished that he was; when he remembered that not everyone was out there to make fun of him he actually made for real good company. Maybe she should've told him that sometime. Well, too late now. Besides, the way he acted most times he'd be just as likely to think that she was mocking him instead of actually *liking* him.

She leaned back in her chair, then sighed again. Being friends with Jonathan Byers was difficult, at times, she'd found. Except he was worth it, too, and she needed him besides. If not for the scar at his hand that matched her own she might've thought that she and Steve had caught themselves in some delusion, and that her scar was really from something else. Without his help her work in tracking the gates wouldn't be worth half as much as it was now. And without him to talk to ... she'd still have Steve, of course; but if the one month after that week in November, when her entire contact with Jonathan Byers had consisted of a few unsure looks and a word or two every week had taught her anything then it was that with only Steve around her she didn't feel right. She needed them both, and Nancy very much suspected that it was the same for them. They'd gone through this

together, and now they had to live with it, all three of them. Together, they made a group. Of friends, maybe. Of survivors, or veterans. People who knew each other in a way most others didn't.

Something like that, anyways. Nancy wasn't really sure, and normally she didn't waste her time like this, wondering about what they were. Except normally none of them stormed off in the middle of a conversation.

Wait, what? Wasting time? Oh. Suddenly she remembered where she was, and what had just happened. Jonathan was probably fleeing the house.

Nancy sprang up from her chair, then ran out of the room and down the stairs. Too late. When she reached the living room there was no sign of Jonathan except for a pair of boots that wasn't there any longer, that had only left a few smudges of water on the doormat as proof that they'd been there at all. Snow from outside that had melted, snow he must've brought in with him.

Her mother sat on the couch.

"Jonathan left maybe half a minute ago," she told Nancy, concerned, "did something happen?"

Oh God, but her mother could be annoying. "No," Nancy said, then thought, *no, I'm better than this now, we're sticking together*, and amended it to "I'm not sure yet."

Thankfully, her mother seemed satisfied with that.

And now? Jonathan was gone. Should she chase after him? By now, he was probably already home; by foot, that was a twenty-minute walk, and she wasn't the bike-obsessed teenager that her brother was (and of course she had neither car nor driving license, because *fuck her dad*). Not to mention that she wasn't even sure how Jonathan would react to her showing up at his house; she hadn't been there since ... well, since they'd almost burnt it down. It was always him who came here, or occasionally to Steve's house, when his parents weren't home. Hell, she wasn't even sure how she *herself* might react to seeing it again. That place where they'd faced the monster.

Sometimes, Nancy wondered how he could still live in that.

No, she decided at last. She'd take ages to even reach him, and once there, what was she supposed to say to him? In any case, he'd have to show up again in an hour at most, just to get Will home; she could always intercept him then and get him to talk.

Or ... Steve had said he might come round later for dinner, because apparently he was the type of guy to eat dinner with his girlfriend's family now, instead of the more douchebaggy, *I'm-cooler-than-this-shit* him he'd been when they'd first fallen in love. Well, a lot had happened since then; in fact, Nancy almost suspected that she'd changed at least as much, she just hadn't really noticed it herself.

How much time was left until dinner, anyways? It would hardly do any good if she stormed off now and didn't come back in time. Not because of Steve, he'd probably understand if she explained it later, but God her parents ... especially her dad, but her mum, too.

A glance at the clock. Not quite half an hour. Steve would probably come a bit before that, too. In all likelihood, he'd be here any minute. Was it even sensible to head back upstairs to her room before that?

For some more moments Nancy just stood in front of the door, undecided. No, she wouldn't follow Jonathan, but what else could she do?

The sound of a bunch of kids laughing in the basement came almost as in answer. *No more secrets*, she'd promised Mike, and mostly held herself to that standard, too. Well, she hadn't told him about monitoring the gates, but ... that wasn't really a secret, was it? Just a way to deal with it all. In any case, maybe they weren't as close as Jonathan and his little brother, but they also didn't hate each other mindlessly anymore (that was not to say that they'd stopped teasing each other; they'd just stopped being so damn mean about it). She'd just ... check in on him. Him and his chaos-obsessed friends.

Also, sometimes, some weird part of her longed to go back to that time when she'd actually once played that weird game with them, when they'd gotten her to dress up as an elf or something. That was probably childish, sure, but it had been fun, too. And seeing, now,

how Jonathan was with Will ... sometimes Nancy felt as if she'd missed out on something.

With only a vague idea of what she was doing (or even wanted to do) Nancy turned around, walked past the stairs leading up to her room and opened the basement door. She had the distinct impression of random chattering cut short in the exact moment she set eyes on everyone. Then some rapid movement caught her eye; someone had bolted somewhere else very quickly, in an apparent attempt to hide, and that'd been ...

No. No. That just can't be. He'd tell her if ...

But would he? Some mean voice whispered, *would he really?*

No. Slowly going down the stairs, she saw who was sitting at their gaming table. Mike, of course, together with Dustin and Lucas. It was Will, then, who must've hidden somewhere for some reason. She hadn't seen him in ages, hadn't even really had a meaningful conversation with him after he'd woken up in that hospital, because that hadn't been a place for her, that'd been for Jonathan and Mrs. Byers, and Will's friends ...

"Hi Nancy." Mike sounded nervous. Well, she'd just burst in without warning, so maybe ...

"Hi," the other two echoed their friend, similarly ... anxious. Almost fearful.

"Hi, you guys," she greeted back, then, looking at the one empty seat, "where's Will?"

She'd just seen a phantom, or something, her brain had recognized a pattern that wasn't there because she'd still been thinking about Jonathan and the portals and everything; yes, that must be it.

"Ah, he is ..." Mike started.

"— in the bathroom?" That was Lucas.

"Yeah. Probably won't be back for a while." Mike again.

“He sometimes gets sick. Still.” Dustin, now.

Nancy took a moment to deal with their rapid stream of words before she could make any sense of them.

“Is he okay? I mean, you just leave him all alone?”

“Yeah, ahm ...” Mike was almost shivering now. “Actually I’d better go and check on him.”

Nancy’s eyes followed him as he got up and walked towards the bathroom door, but then got stuck at something else entirely. Here was the blanket fort, the one that Mike’d kept up with not as much as an inch changed since that week in November ... and someone’d messed it up. Half the blankets lay on the floor, and ...

She saw, then. The girl was good at hiding, but not good enough. The blanket had moved, just by a bit, and moreover it rose and fell rhythmically, as if someone was breathing beneath it. Nancy walked over and lifted the blankets up.

Then, almost in shock, she let them fall to the floor. She’d been right. She’d been *right, damn it!*

El was there, with longer hair, and not in Nancy’s old dress, but undeniably the same girl as three months ago. Shock was on her face, too, though she seemed far from panicking. In fact, she almost seemed to be relaxing.

“Hello, Nancy,” she said.

By the time that her mum called down the stairs to tell her that Steve was there, Nancy had almost forgotten he’d wanted to come, or how Jonathan had fled her room not even an hour ago, so much had she been absorbed in everything that was going on down here.

In fact, she'd gotten so caught up in the whole business of El being back — first being slightly shocked, then overjoyed, then promising her help and dresses (if she wanted any of that old stuff, that was) and quite possibly Eggos, then slowly wondering where the girl had been and what she'd been through, and then trying hard not to show that or even ask her and instead to keep up the illusion that everything was okay — that she hadn't even gotten around to demanding from Mike why he hadn't told her anything.

No more secrets, right? And this wasn't like her monitoring the gates; no way this could be a minor issue he hadn't thought relevant for her ... or was it? Did he think El meant so little to his sister that he didn't have to tell her?

One look at him told her that he'd been quietly hoping she'd just overlook it. Well, she hadn't. "Mike?"

"Ah ... I wanted to tell you, but ..." he trailed off. "No, actually, no but. I just ... I'm sorry I didn't tell you, I really should've."

Nancy sighed. "And I guess that Will's not *actually* behind that door, either?"

"No. He's at home, actually, hasn't been to school today, either, and ..."

But right then their conversation was cut short, and Nancy had no more time for trying to get answers from her brother.

"*Nancy! Steve is here!*" Her mum shouted, loud enough to be heard throughout the entire house.

A sigh, almost. "Yes mum, I'm coming!"

Nancy opened the door to let her boyfriend in, trying hard not to think about El downstairs or Jonathan running off as if scared of

something that she couldn't see.

"Hey Nance," he greeted her, that goofy and entirely stupid smile on his face. He, at least, still was the same as ever. For a moment she could forget everything else, and just live in that moment.

"Hey Steve."

They kissed (though not as long as Nancy would've liked; but they weren't alone, and her mother was there watching), and suddenly Nancy couldn't understand what she'd been on about just a minute ago.

But after the separated again, when Steve stopped for a moment, just to get his shoes off, worries already began to pour back in on her. *Not now*, Nancy tried admonishing herself, *plenty of time for that later. Just try to get through this family dinner or ... or at least worry about what dad might say during that, no need to think about Jonathan and gates and El ...* But there she was already back again; what *about El*? What was Mike planning on doing with her, during dinner?

Meanwhile, Nancy's mum came over from the kitchen. "I didn't expect you so early," she told Steve, "does waiting half an hour sound okay to you? I only just put the potatoes on ..."

"Sounds great, Mrs. Wheeler," Steve told her, still with that goofy smile. Nancy's mother nodded, satisfied, and vanished again.

Oh God, how am I gonna manage half an hour of pretending that nothing's amiss?

Well, turned out she didn't have to. As soon as Steve turned back to her, his smile got shaky, almost frozen. "Hey Nance, is everything okay?"

So much for not worrying, she guessed. Although she was spared the need to answer when the doorbell rang again, closely followed by someone pounding on the door.

"Nancy? You there?" That was Jonathan's voice, and he sounded almost desperate. Steve opened the door, a frown on his face. Nancy almost expected him to start shouting loudly about what was going

on, the way he had that night when the lights had started flickering ...

With the door open, they could see Jonathan standing outside, tears on his face, obviously scared shitless. *Scrap that almost before the desperate*, Nancy thought. Only once had she seen him in a state even remotely similar to this, and that'd been when Steve'd broken his camera. He looked worse now, *much* worse. And given that his camera bag dangled from his neck same as ever, it clearly wasn't that this time.

"Hell, man, you okay?" That was Steve, the only one of them capable of keeping his cool no matter what happened (well, almost, but better than the other two at least). When Steve *did* break he'd scramble around like a maniac, but before that he remained a reassuring pool of calmness.

There were only few things that Jonathan clung to closer than to the camera (*Nancy liked to think that she was one of those, by now*).

"No," he said, struggling not to sob, "I'm not. Will. They've taken Will." There was no need for him to elaborate on who *they* meant.

Nancy had almost known those words even before he'd said them, but it was still worlds different, knowing them versus actually hearing him say them out loud ...

"Who's *they*?" Steve asked. Sometimes Nancy wasn't sure at all how many of these irritatingly stupid questions were him actually being dense or just him pretending, trying to lighten the mood. And sometimes that worked, too, although right now wasn't one of them.

"Hawkins Lab," Jonathan sobbed, then asked "Is Mike still here?"

"Yeah, he's in the base —" but even before she'd finished that sentence, Jonathan had stormed off to the stairs leading down there.

To her own surprise, Nancy found herself in the basement sitting on the staircase along with Steve and Jonathan, since all the chairs were already occupied by Mike and his friends.

“Okay, somebody care to explain what’s going on?” Steve asked. Nancy could well have asked that question herself. Jonathan had just hurried down the stairs, shouted something about an *Elrond’s Council* or something that Nancy hadn’t understood, then clarified *now*, and suddenly the kids had all stopped talking, instead looking expectantly at Jonathan.

“What’s the situation, Jonathan?” That was Lucas, completely ignoring Steve.

“I ... when I came back home, Will and mum were gone. Hawkins Lab.” Jonathan’d sat down on the stairs, apparently more so that he wouldn’t be able to break down sobbing than because of anything else.

“The drawer?” Lucas pressed.

“Yeah. Mum must’ve had just enough time to through the drawings in.”

What’s any drawer or drawings got to do with anything? Nancy could only wonder.

“Bad place.” That was El, now, her voice full of fear.

“Yeah, I guess so.” Jonathan again, resigned. Suddenly she had the intense impulse to just give him a hug, though that probably wouldn’t help anyone.

For a moment silence filled the basement.

“Okay,” Dustin said, “should we call Mr. Clarke?”

Lucas answered. “I don’t think we can wait for him, but ...”

Mike cut him off. “I’ll call him, you guys go on without me.” And with that, he stormed past Jonathan, Nancy and Steve and up the stairs.

In the ensuing short moment of quiet, Steve asked, “You mean the science teacher Mr. Clarke? What’s he got to do with anything?”

“He’s ahh —” Dustin started, then cut himself off, looking at the others, “motion to include Nancy and Jonathan into the Council of Elrond?”

Dustin raised his arm, as did Lucas and El. Jonathan seemed exasperated, almost frustrated, but then did the same. Shrugging, Steve raised his as well. Nancy gave him a confused look; had she missed something, how did he know what he was supposed to do? No, probably he was just pretending to know, the way he usually did.

“Council of Elrond sounds cool,” was all he cared to give her as explanation.

“Okay, motion passed,” that was Dustin again, just as Mike came back down the stairs.

“He doesn’t answer the phone,” he said, “motion to continue without him?”

Everyone raised their hand, though Jonathan audibly groaned this time. Nancy put one hand on his shoulder to keep him from bursting out in anger; she wasn’t really sure what this was they were all doing (or what it had to do with the name of an elf), but she thought that she could *understand* it well enough. As long as they kept this thing up, whatever it was, none of them would fall into sheer panic; just as she’d turned all the portals into long list of scrawled numbers so she wouldn’t die of worry, they’d apparently set up a few rules and simulated parliamentary debates, for whatever reason.

“Passed,” Lucas said, “how much time do we have, anyways?”

“No idea.” That was Mike again. “If they took them both ... well, no idea.”

“Pa — Brenner is dead. I do not know.” El, this time.

“Well,” Steve said, “your mum said dinner’s going to be ready in half an hour, so I’d guess about thirty minutes?”

Jonathan looked like he might want to gut him. The rest was merely annoyed. Steve held his hands up, goofy smile on his face again. "What? *You* asked how much time."

As much as she hated it, Nancy had to admit that if he *was* trying to get everyone's mood up instead of just actually being dense, it *did* work, at least for her.

"Okay, but what are we going to do now?" that was Mike. Although that was basically a moot question, everyone knew what they were going to do; the only thing that they had yet to figure out was *how* they'd go about it.

Half an hour later, when Karen Wheeler called down the stairs that dinner was ready, no one answered her. She asked Ted if he knew where they were, but got no satisfying (or in any way helpful) answer. But when she walked down to the basement herself, she found it empty and the back door closed, but also that her son's bike was missing. Through the windows in the living room she noticed that both of the boy's cars had vanished as well. She sighed.

Well, potato and chicken could wait; those were easy enough to store for some hours, or even a day; she'd warm them up again when her family showed up. Worries, however, were another matter. As was Ted's annoying indifference.

Notes for the Chapter:

Nancy's a tough one. Maybe 'cause she's so entirely unlike me ...

Any thoughts on the chapter?

13. Steve

“El says that the air is toxic,” Mike told him, then got his scarf and bound it up around his head so it covered the boy’s mouth and nose.

Steve did the same, wondering how he’d gotten himself into this. At least he had a scarf with him, given how cold this winter was; less fortunate, though, that no one’d ever meant for air to get through that thing. With this on, every breath he took became an effort, almost like some weird new form of sports. Except he’d suffocate should he ever get out of breath, and any break he took might as well kill him. *Oh, that’s just great!*

Jonathan looked at him, his look clearly saying *well, life’s shit, how had you not noticed that by now?* Maybe, he thought, this was some sort of cosmic revenge he’d earned himself for always making fun of Jonathan’s constantly bleak view on fuckin’ *everything*.

Lucas, meanwhile, had a bandana around his head, which taken together with the slingshot that he insisted was a *wrist-rocket* made him look so much like a kid wannabe-soldier it was seriously ridiculous. Except for the look on his face; *that* was most certainly the real thing. Steve got the shivers, seeing that look on a kid as young as this boy. That was how a movie cop was supposed to look, or maybe even Clint Eastwood ... what had he been doing at, what? Twelve? Thirteen? Probably annoying everyone, or bullying the other kids. Oh, no, wait! Thirteen, that’s been ... oh God. With thirteen he’d had his first embarrassing interactions with girls. Nothing much that he wanted to remember, and certainly nothing that would’ve made him capable of storming into an evil world in search of a lost friend.

Hell, had he *had* any actual friends? Possibly he’d thought he had, but Steve rather doubted that any of them would’ve ever even considered going this far for him.

Dustin, meanwhile, looked like some mad reporter on tour who had a resoundingly poor sense for fashion. There was something like a headset with an antenna on the boy’s head, together with a microphone; all of that was apparently in tune to the bulky supercom that Mike carried around with him. He also had a neckerchief over

his mouth and nose, of course, which made Steve somewhat doubtful about the whole setup with the mike.

Nancy looked like, well, like only Nancy could. She had Jonathan's gun in her hand, and if there was anything in her eyes it was probably determination to go through with it. In its sheer force, only Lucas's face could rival it. This wasn't what people (well, mostly Tommy) had called *she looks like she wants to kill you, man!* whenever he'd fucked up some short-term relationship or other. Except that those girls might've thought that they wanted to kill him, might've honestly believed it, too, but they also hadn't ever considered going through with it. Nancy was all that, except that it wasn't just play-acting; Steve wouldn't be surprised if more than one shot of that gun would go flying this night.

Jonathan, meanwhile, was just Jonathan. Looking at him, Steve was almost sure he could read his thoughts. *Life's always shit, so I can take if it gets worse.* Or at least he thought it might be a pretty good guess. Except for the improvised breathing-mask, he looked the same as ever, meaning *miserable*.

And that girl El looked like ... well, like no girl he'd ever seen. Even after he'd driven them all across town several times, collecting weapons and supercomms (and for the first time noticing just how many of those damned white vans were on the streets) he couldn't quite accept the sight of her, not yet. She wore boy's clothes, but he wasn't sure if she could be called a *tomboy*; being a tomboy sort of implied that the girl in question knew *why* she'd be called that. More than anything, this girl seemed fundamentally *alien* to any conventions that might exist around her. If she violated any unspoken dresscodes for badass-looking young girls who could make things fly around with her mind then she just wasn't aware of it. That impression was only reinforced, given that she was the only one who hadn't improvised a breathing mask.

She'd barely said two words since being introduced to Steve, but there was no denying that, at least for now, she was the leader of this party of vengeful friends of Will Byers, the boy who'd come back to life. For maybe ten minutes now they'd walked around the woods to the meager shine of flashlights with doubtful battery status, and though Steve (and he guessed Jonathan and Nancy as well) had a

rough idea of where they were — after all, he'd helped searching and monitoring portals around here those last three months — she alone seemed to know what they were actually doing. Sever times now she'd turned around, sometimes exchanging a muttered word with Mike, sometimes stopping to examine something or to just close her eyes and stand completely still for half a minute while the rest of them had followed behind.

"She's searching for a seam big enough to get us through," Dustin said when he'd asked, as if that was the most obvious thing in the world. Well, maybe it was. Steve might've seen portals every week for three months now, but that didn't mean he had any fucking clue about what might lie on the other side of them.

Except now she appeared to have found something. A gesture to Mike, and they'd all put on their inadequate replacements for breathing masks. El stood in front of a tree, just barely illuminated by dancing flashlights in her friend's hands, apparently doing nothing at all. To Steve it looked like any other place in the forest; he had absolutely no clue why she'd chosen this spot.

Something better happen soon, Steve thought, I'll just freeze to the ground. Not really how I'd expected this evening to end, with me stuck in damned snow. He'd actually just come over for dinner away from his family, and maybe an evening with Nance ...

For some moments longer nothing changed. Then, just barely, a low humming cut through the icy air. For a moment Steve was alarmed, before realizing that it came from El. No, hang on, it didn't; it came from the *tree*. Steve stared. Before his eyes, once of those webby spider-infested things that Nancy'd called *gates* appeared, at first just a small hole, as if some bird'd made a nest there and then abandoned it, whereupon some nameless spidery things had taken it over and made it their own, nightmarish version of a nest.

And it *grew*. Slowly at first, then faster, enveloping the tree in a low, dark red glow pulsating outwards; the portal's rims crept over the bark like some disgusting thick, slimy liquid. Steve'd seen these things before, of course; had known that they appeared and disappeared, and that they sometimes grew or shrunk. He'd just never actually seen it happen, and certainly never at this size. The

portals they normally found were maybe a few inches in diameter, and seldom more than a foot or two. And those were already bad enough to look at; if it hadn't helped Nance cope then Steve would've never gone up close to those either. This, though, looked worse, one terrifying hell of a goddamned lot worse than the smaller ones. The (spider?) webs inside it expanded, stretched out, but wouldn't rip apart; instead, it almost seemed like they grew *stronger* the larger this thing got. Some of them appeared to bend into new places, reaching out to connect with others, sticking together and making nodes through which the eerie lights from the inside shimmered through. His stomach felt like it wanted to vomit.

Steve'd never gotten it into his head how some people could be so afraid of spiders; sure, a healthy respect for them was fine and necessary, after all, you never knew which of them might or might not be poisonous, by why anyone would feel the need to run out of a room with just because it had a spider in it, screaming for all it was worth, had always been a mystery to him. He'd come to accept that some people just had this sort of idiosyncratic urge to do just that whenever they spied one sitting on a window shelf, or on a wall.

Now, suddenly, looking at the gate growing like this, he found himself trying very hard not to give into exactly that urge. Steve wanted to *run*. He'd been fine with those portal-things before, when they'd been small and he'd just been looking at them, sure — if it helped Nance cope, then who was he to run away scared like a fuckin' baby? But this, this, this was taking all that shit to a whole goddamned new level. Steve stared. He didn't want to stay here one moment longer.

Steve stayed, and stared, transfixed.

Inside the portal, low red nightmare deadlights shimmered as it grew.

At last it stopped growing. El wiped her hand across her face, and when she turned around Steve saw she had traces of blood beneath her nose. *Right, no sick shit here at all!* Oh God, what was this that he'd gotten himself into? This was already worse than those lights flashing in Jonny Boy's house, way worse.

El took a step forward, then stopped and looked behind, at the rest of

them. "Follow me," was all she said before turning her head back front again. Then she walked right into the spider webs, which parted and let her through. And then they fucking well *grew back together* once she was gone, making a solid, opaque wall behind her. *Christ!* She was gone.

For one last moment Steve saw the rest of the group together. Mike, scrawny kid that he was, didn't lose a moment following the girl. Lucas was next. Dustin winced, but then went through as well.

Nancy looked at him, almost looking scared. *Almost*. Then she fucking *smirked*, and went through it like a knight on a quest who'd just found the dragon.

Now it was just Jonathan and him, alone in the woods in front of a pulsating, sick reddish gate-something. And what was he doing here, anyways? He, Steve Harrington, with that hair going straight up to heaven, a baseball bat with fucking nails driven through it in his hand and a thick scarf almost choking his lungs of. Only now realizing that somehow the idea of going *through* one of these things had never actually occurred to him. *Yeah, well*, he thought. *Gates. Portals*. That probably should've been obvious. Oh holy shit.

Jonathan turned to look at him for a moment. Steve felt that could really use one of the guy's *life's shit* comments right now (not that Jonathan ever put it so direct, he normally found more subtle ways to say things than Steve would). Christ, what was he, shittalker and high school baseball champion, even doing here at all?

Except when Jonathan spoke, it wasn't at all what Steve had expected. "You okay?" he asked Steve. The neckerchief made Jonathan's voice sound even more muffled than usual.

Huh. What a question. What an a-fuckingly *hard* question. What was more, he thought to understand that this was Jonathan giving him a way of backing out. Steve knew the guy by now; if he said right now that he wasn't coming with them Jonathan would probably say *I understand*, before vanishing through this thing himself.

Steve answered the question with a simple "Sure, man." He had to say that twice, though; the first time the scarf just ate it. Then, after a

moment's consideration, he added "Shouldn't you be doing some subtle life doubt complaining right now?"

"Naw," Jonathan assured him, "from the look on you, you're already doing that job just fine by yourself."

For a moment Steve stared at him, flabbergasted. The man's supposed social anxiety aside, was that guy *teasing* him, just moments before they'd both go through a fucking disgusting interdimensional spider-portal? Now he was even flashing that rare smile of his, the one Steve hadn't even known that the guy was capable of doing until only two weeks ago. He *was*, God damn him! Look here, ladies and gentlemen! Jonathan fucking Byers got nerve enough to tease Steve Harrington!

Steve got halfway through play-hitting the man when Jonathan suddenly grabbed his arm and dragged them both through the gate, giving Steve no time at all to worry himself shitless about spiderwebs getting into his hair.

The other side had a floor made of goo. That was about the first thing Steve thought as he stumbled out of it, not even daring to lift his eyes after the thoroughly repulsive journey through the spiderwebs.

The flashlights aside, the whole thing seemed to lie in a sort of eternal dull red twilight, except there was no sun coming up the horizon; rather, the awful red light seemed to seep directly out the bleak, desolate sky, where the deadlights he'd seen shimmering through the portal lay ... and there was a very slight but still sickening blueish glow that seemed to stem from the world itself. Little blue particles danced through the air, and suddenly Steve was very glad that Mike had told him to bind the scarf around his head. The air was warm, the way the air above a rotting carcass of flesh is warm.

Slowly, he lifted his head, and his view with it. What he saw was ...

almost majestic, he guessed, like an entire cathedral made solely of human skulls might look majestic. It faintly reminded him of great constructions made from paper mâché or plastic or whatever that he'd seen in horror movies, except that this was undoubtedly the real thing. This wasn't what one got to see on screen, this was the surreal (and quite probably drug-induced) nightmare of a dream that the designer had had before being forced to settle on some crazy ridiculous paper thing instead.

Trouble was, this wasn't any movie. He wasn't in the back of the theater, a safe distance from the screen. Steve was *right there*, and his fear wasn't the poorly acted one of cheap b-movie terror. This was *all* real. Dimly, he realized that his hand was shaking like mad, and brought it up to right his hair. One of those things he did when nervous; not that he'd ever even really thought about that, not before now. Except now his hair was a sticky mess of thick strands held together by spiderwebs and goo, and putting his hand into it felt like gripping hold of someone's repulsive nightmare of grass soaked with snail slime. *Ugh!*

Looking up, he saw the lights dancing far above him, like someone's mocking replacement of a nice and warm sun that should be hanging there. Their light was a deep dreadful red that doused the whole world into a cloak of otherworldliness that he really didn't care for. Deadlights. *Dreadlights*. Steve looked back down to the ground.

"Jonathan?" That was Nancy, the first he heard saying anything. Far from the smirking impression of a knight earlier, she sounded just as shaken as Steve felt. "you see those lights up there?"

"Yeah?"

"Those weren't there the last time I was here."

"No." Jonathan agreed.

"New," was El's input on the matter.

Steve shivered. From what he'd gathered this place was bad enough, but if it had somehow gotten worse since the last time Nance'd been here ...

"Everyone alright?" Dustin asked. He got a string of weak *yeahs* as his answer.

"Okay, does the equipment still work?" Lucas, now, taking charge.

"Flashlights seem to work, for now," Mike said. He let his supercomm crack for a moment, and looked at Dustin.

"Ah, nope, don't hear anything." The sigh was obvious in Dustin's voice.

Nancy, meanwhile, had opened her gun as if to reload, then closed it again. "Gun looks fine," she reported.

"Yeah," Dustin agreed, "it only seems to wreck electricity, not mechanics."

Jonathan took out his camera from the bag he still carried, for some reason, and took a picture. The flash only blinked weakly, but the *click* seemed about right to Steve. Not that he had any idea why Jonathan'd thought bringing the camera would be a good idea.

"Well, we'll see later if it did anything," was Jonathan's conclusion.

"Nail-bat looks good to go," Steve said into the ensuing silence, just so he wouldn't have to be completely silent. Silence made lonely in this place, he found. Jonathan gave him a weak grin, Nancy rolled her eyes. The rest ignored him.

"Okay, let's go. Stick together. Everyone follow El." Lucas again. By some unspoken agreement — maybe because he was the not-quite-just wannabe-soldier — he seemed to be in command.

Slowly, they trod across the desolate deadlands, the dreadlights overhead. Nobody muttered as much as a word, except El, and that was only once. "It's here," she said. For half a moment Steve was on the verge of angrily demanding what *it* was, but he quickly decided he'd rather not ask after all. And besides, he felt it, too; a sort of low-key something lying all over the forest, enveloping all the horror in something that was more powerful still.

Together they walked further, across strange roots sticking up from

the ground, around hideous plants that Steve hoped he'd never see again in his life. Once, he thought he'd seen an egg lying on the ground, its shell broken, but he tried not to think about that.

Those little floating blue dots were *everywhere*. Once or twice he actually had to force them out of the way with his bare hand, lest they get into his eyes. He *really* didn't want to think about how his hair might look right now, with spiderwebs and glowing blue things in it, but found that he did so all the same. Well, still better than thinking about other things, out here.

Looking around, he saw that Nancy, at least, shared some of his overpowering fear about where they were. She'd said that she was here before ... Steve was willing to bet that it hadn't been a pleasant experience, and that maybe it'd even been the reason why she was still so obsessed with everything that'd happened, why she still couldn't sleep. Sure, he'd seen the monster, and he'd driven the nails of this bat deep into it; he'd seen the lights flashing madly, too, but if he imagined that instead they'd have dragged him here ...

Jonathan, by some miracle, managed to look no more depressed than he normally did. Sometimes, Steve had to admit that he almost admired the guy, even sometimes envied him. Maybe, if one just didn't care too much about most things, it made it easier to walk through a literal horror dimension, just as it also increased the bullying one had to put up with.

Dustin and Mike walked steadily, but with a healthy amount of hesitations every now and then. Still, they seemed determined to get through this, whatever might come at the end of their pathway. Now and then some of them stumbled across an unseen root.

Lucas formed the head of their strange little procession (or was it a battle troupe?), along with El. He held his flashlight as if he couldn't care one bit about what terrors its light showed him. But after looking at him for a while, Steve noticed that though the flashlight was steady, the boy's *other* hand was shaking, and badly so.

El alone seemed to be completely unfazed by anything that this world might throw at her. She was also along in that she looked like she very much knew where she was going (Steve hoped that she did,

because he very much didn't), and still hadn't even bothered to put up a scarf or neckerchief for a breathing mask. Instead, it looked like she just forced everything around her not to get into her way; the strange little blue pollen, for one thing, just stopped dead maybe two feet in front of her before then going sideways and around her. Occasionally she shuddered, but that was it.

Steve clutched the baseball bat tighter. Maybe that'd do something against the shivering hand (it didn't, but he could pretend that it did, and that alone helped, if only a little).

Slowly, fearful but determined, their party made its way through the forest.

Even from afar the tower had been a thing so gigantic Steve had scarcely believed his eyes. They's spied it through the trees shortly before leaving the bygone forest behind, and ever since then it had become a sort of beacon; a great big sign of *this is where you're going, guys*. He'd craned his neck, but there was not a chance in hell of ever finding its upper end.

The tower just stood there, not moving except for slight shudders, an enormous looming thing that Steve couldn't comprehend. Up, far up, somewhere at its top, Steve thought it might hold the red lights. The deadlights. The *dreadlights*. He didn't turn to look, though; the light they sent down was more than enough. Shortly before they'd left the forest the flashlights had died, and ever since then the entire world seemed a pulsating mass of low unnatural red light. Had someone asked him he couldn't even have said what it was about it all that made it seem so fundamentally *wrong* to him; he could just say that it felt like an evil presence out to eat him; it just *was*. Perhaps there was some fundamental human instinct in him that relentlessly told him that he should back off, that he'd get eaten any minute now.

Steve tried very hard to make that part of him shut up, but it would

be useless denying its presence.

Even El felt it, he thought. She still didn't outwardly show any signs of fear or even apprehension about where they were going, but Steve saw well enough that her steps lacked the certainty they'd carried before. Once, she'd almost stumbled. The others were similar. Dustin and Mike made no pretense of being unfazed; they moved, but there wasn't any question that they'd rather be anywhere else than here. Lucas still seemed almost unimpressed, but it was still a far cry from the soldier-like demeanor he'd showed half an hour ago, when they'd set out. Nancy shook almost as much as Steve did himself. Even Jonathan seemed to think that the day was worse than average, and that didn't happen often.

And Steve? Why, he tried his very best not to roll himself into a panicking ball of catatonic human meat.

You're in this with them, he told himself. *You've managed to save Johnny boy here last time, you'll get the hang of it this time, too.* If only that'd actually did anything to convince him.

But now it seemed to be almost over. The tower loomed closer, stretching far into the bleak sky above them where it vanished in a deep, thick layer of clouds that were almost solid, with only the red dreadlights shining down. Not that Steve cared to look.

He stared at what he guessed was the wall of the tower. Scrap what he'd said before; the tower wasn't unmoving. It just didn't move much. This wasn't a wall as much as a wobbling great slimy something that looked like it was just waiting to bulge out and swallow them all whole. No, that didn't cut it either. It was just ... *wrong*. That was really the only word he had to describe it. This didn't look like something that should ever have existed, plain and simple, and that was the most that Steve would ever comprehend about that. It simply moved in a way that no thing ought to move in.

Well, whatever it was, maybe six or seven feet above the ground it had a sort of shimmering round band around it. And beneath that, going all the way down to the ground, stood a ladder. Even before they'd reached it Steve clung to its ordinary, perfectly American (Earthern?) steel. This here was something he knew, something that

he could understand. On a ladder not entirely unlike this one he'd stood three months ago, wiping *NANCY THE SLUT WHEELER* from a cinema entrance. An isle of familiarity in a sea of terror.

El stopped once she got there, as did Lucas. The rest of them arrived shortly after that.

"Up there," she said. Steve looked, and saw that what he'd taken for a band enveloping the tower was in fact another gate. Beyond it he could see a dimly-lit white ceiling, of the sort used in cost-effective government buildings, dimly lit by low blue light. It was overgrown with some hideous plant-like growth, but after this place (world?) here it seemed almost comfortable.

"Okay." That was Lucas, still in charge by unspoken agreement. "Once we're up there, the flashlights should start working again, if we need them. Everyone be as silent as possible."

"El?" This was Mike. "Do you know where Will might be? In there?"

The girl shook her head, sadness on her face. Then, maybe to make up for her lack of knowledge, she went up the ladder. Lucas and the rest followed close behind.

This gate, at least, wasn't populated by sticky spiderwebs spreading an eerie glow; Steve got through it without even noticing much. The ladder, too, went right through it without much notice. For a moment he wondered what'd happen if he touched the edge of the portal, where it split the two worlds apart. Would it catch him, or just slice his hand right into two? He decided he'd rather not find out.

Looking from beneath, from the other world, he'd thought that this room here up the ladder almost seemed like home. Only now that he was actually up there, it didn't make him one bit more comfortable about anything. Rather the opposite; the sheer fact that these were normal walls covered by these ... these things was more than just disquieting. *I'm coming for you*, it seemed to say, *oh, not for you; did you honestly believe you were that important? No, I'm not coming for you alone, or for any other human. I'm just gonna swallow this entire world whole, and it'll be the best meal I've had in a while! Oh, just look at you! Walls! Cute! Like icing on a cake!* The walls were overgrown with

hideous ungodly horror plants.

“We’d best be careful,” Jonathan said, “whoever put the ladder here might be watching.”

“Yeah,” Lucas agreed. “Stick together. If anyone sees anything, don’t panic. If anyone sees you ... well, we’ll see.”

“Okay, man, enough with the gloomy talk.” That was Dustin. Maybe he tried cheering them up (or even just himself), but it didn’t work much. “Let’s go exploring.”

There was a corridor leading further into the station, just as overgrown as the station itself. Even now, Steve didn’t dare to take the scarf off his head, no matter how much he couldn’t breathe in it. Here and there these blue pollen were still floating around.

“Be quiet, everyone,” Lucas whispered.

Slowly, they crept along the corridor. Just as silently, El forced the door open. Steve’s jaw almost dropped when he saw the corroded steel rip itself free and float through the air. Carefully, she sat it down next to the wall, squeezing some of the terror tendrils to death as she did so. Before walking past it, Steve took a closer look. A foot thick, massive steel, though heavily corroded, and as wide as the corridor itself. It must’ve weighed ... Steve didn’t even want to guess. And El had just thrown it around as if it were nothing.

El wiped some blood from her face again, then lead them on through the now-open doorway.

Behind it was a largish room, almost a hall, overgrown beyond any use. In its middle sat fat iron latches, and a torn steel rope right next to them. A bit behind that towered a tall cylindrical something, dominating the room like nothing else. El, who’d until now seemingly not cared at all about where she sat her feet avoided it by a wide margin, visibly frightened, inciting the rest of them to stay clear of the thing as well.

“Mike?” she said. “Here. That’s the gate. That I opened, where it started.” She pointed, her hand shaking, to a gigantic monstrosity

sitting on the far wall like a fat spider in its web. Shuddering, Steve noticed that the plant growth seemed to originate from there.

“They’ve closed it,” she observed, visibly shaking.

Then Mike said something that left Steve entirely nonplussed. “You’re not a monster, El.”

But she seemed to understand what he meant. “I know,” she whispered, after closing her eyes for a moment and taking a deep breath. “I know.”

“Hey,” Nancy called to them. “Let’s move on.” She’d gone further, to a side-door which she’d forced open. Beyond lay a dark, shoddy thin hallway in a dismal state of disrepair. After a short while it split up into two, and for a moment they stopped, silently debating which of the two options to take.

It was then that they heard the footsteps approaching from behind. Steve was on the verge of giving in to panic. Then came a great loud *creak* followed by a softer *clack*, and suddenly it was fully dark. Mike and Dustin turned on the flashlights; thankfully they worked, this time. Steve didn’t even turn around to see what had happened, he didn’t need to in order to know: El had closed and locked the door through which they’d come.

From the other side came low shouts. They were loud enough that they almost would’ve missed the sound of further footsteps, still approaching, but this time from the other side. Bright as they were, they probably made for great target practice. Steve shuddered.

Mike and Dustin turned the flashlights forwards, each to one of the corridors. In one or both men were coming. They couldn’t see far, though; both ended in sharp turns not far from where they stood. Not much time, then.

The seven of them stared in apprehension. Waiting like this was worse even than walking here had been, Steve thought; at least then he’d had something to focus on.

He saw Nancy lifting the gun ...

Left! Steve almost freaked. He'd seen the cone of a flashlight hushing past there, and the others had as well. Waiting now almost strained his nerves enough to snap them into two ...

Suddenly the men were there, armed, guns up and at the ready. With not a moment's hesitation, Nancy opened fire. Gunshots filled the air, one, two, three, tremendous bangs that made Steve's ears pop. One or two of the men fell down.

Suddenly a pause, and the sound of scrambling steps. Evidently they hadn't expected to be opposed so forcefully. Screaming, Nancy ran after them.

"Nancy!" With that, Jonathan was gone, too.

"Shit!" Steve was three or four steps away, after them, when he realized that he couldn't leave the kids alone, undefended. All they had now for protection was Lucas's ridiculous wrist-rocket. Maybe Nancy had the gun, sure, but at least Steve still had the nail-bat.

And it would be only a matter of time before ... turning back, Steve saw it wasn't a matter of any time at all. It was a matter of *now*. From the corridor on the right guards had swarmed as well, apparently unperturbed by their comrades' fright. Scrambling, Steve turned round and rammed the bat around, driving it deep into someone's leg. For the next few moments, everything was merely flashes. He didn't even really know what he was doing, he just *did* it. He wanted to hurt, *hurt* these men who'd sneak up on children and expose them to God knows what shit.

Disorganized shouts rang into his ears. A scream or two, maybe from Mike, maybe from Lucas, maybe from the men in black vests. The *twang* of Lucas's slingshot being released, and the ugly *thump* of someone hitting flesh. Once or twice the disturbing sound of his own weapon finding blood, boring itself deep into someone's arm or leg. Then the bright, unmistakable flash of a gunshot.

What are those crooks doing, shooting at fucking childre — oh.

Suddenly everything froze. Literally; Steve couldn't have moved one finger if his life had depended on it. And in the light of the flashlights

brightening beyond all acceptable levels he could see that it very much *did*. There was a bullet hanging in the air, directly in front of his eyes, frozen along with its entire cloud of smoke it had dragged along behind it, the remnants of the explosion inside the barrel of the gun. The entire scene of battle was frozen in an instant, as if time had just run out.

His eyes alone could still move. The rest of them were frozen just as he was, he saw, all of them; Lucas bravely aiming his slingshot at a half-seen foe, Mike in the middle of falling over. Dustin hung beneath the arm of one of the guards, screaming and kicking for all it was worth. Or he'd been, before turned into something that might as well have been a wax figure, apart from the eyes. His own bat was in the middle of seeking another target. Everyone hung in the moment, literally ... everyone except El. She moved freely, slowly getting up to her feet.

Once he'd managed that, shaking, walked towards him and grabbed the bullet right out the air. *She* was holding them, Steve realized; that little girl had enough power to freeze an entire squad of armed men in mid-fight. Slowly blood trickled down her nose and across her mouth, but she didn't seem to care.

She turned the bullet around, carefully, as if considering where it might go, then let it float free again. Then she turned to face the man who'd released it. Shock was on his face, or rather, it would've been had he able to move. As it was, he could only show the mask of screaming murder he'd apparently worn through the fight.

"Enough." That was all El said, but that tone would've stopped the monster from three months ago dead in its tracks. Had he been able to, Steve would've shuddered, hearing that.

And then suddenly it was over, and time went on. The bullet moved again, as if its flight had never been perturbed, and struck its new goal with unyielding brutality. Blood splattered wide as the man died, dead from his own shot.

A moment later Steve could move again. Stumbling out his awkward position he almost fell over. Dustin got free of the man who'd caught him. Mike fell to the floor at last. Lucas released the slingshot. His

aim had been true; the stone struck the next guard right into the eye, which it left in bloody ruins.

The rest of them turned to flee but where stopped dead in their tracks. For a moment nothing at all happened. Then their heads burst into explosions of blood and brains, producing several ugly *splats* as the corpses littered the ground.

Mere seconds later El fell over as well, unconscious.

Together they moved further into the maze of corridors, trying to follow Nancy and Jonathan. Lucas did his best to lead them, at every turn desperate for any sign of their friends. Mike was spattered with blood all over, his hair a sticky mess of slowly drying crusts. Dustin held the nail-bat in two badly-shaking hands, doing his best to look unconcerned.

Steve had El in his arms and carried her along, hoping beyond anything that she'd wake up again, but almost praying that she never did. No matter how fast they ran, the picture of that gory carnage wouldn't get out of his head. Those men, those corpses ... if this was how justice felt, Steve wasn't so sure about it anymore.

There was nothing else to be done, he told himself, if El hadn't killed them, you would've. Or else you'd all be dead. You saw the bullet that would've struck you had she not intervened.

All of that was most certainly true, but it didn't sweeten the taste of it by one bit.

Down another hallway. Lucas chose the right turn at the next intersection, for whatever reason. Up a corridor. Left, this time. After a long and winding passageway, a dead end. Turn back and start again. Right, this time, where they'd gone left before. That hallway ended with an elevator. Shit. They'd been there before.

He'd seen Hawkins Lab from a distance, once, when he, Tommy and Carol had skipped school one drunken morning and stumbled through the woods and then almost down the cliffs and into the lake. In between the two they'd passed the fence, and taken a moment to stare at that building there, its purpose as mysterious to them as the men in uniform who were guarding the gate.

It had seemed small then, a distant fortress of gray concrete in the middle of nowhere. Steve never would've believed just how fucking *big* this thing was. The whole complex was labyrinthine, and unnavigable mess of hallways. Possibly, he thought, that was intentional, to make it harder for invaders like them.

Lucas hesitated in front of the elevator for a moment, unsure of where to go. Evidently he'd noticed their dilemma about being lost just as Steve had.

"Oh shit, we've been here before." That was Dustin. For some reason Steve found he liked the kid. Sure, weird science geek and everything, but that sentence did a better job at encapsulating his current thoughts than he could've done.

"Yeah ..." Lucas said, as if searching for a way to prove his friend wrong. Not that there was any.

"Well we're no help to Will if we just keep walking in circles!" Mike's anger was clear in his voice. Steve could understand him. He wanted to get shit *done*, not despair in this maze of overgrown corridors full of weird horror shit that most certainly wasn't made of paper mâché.

"Does the elevator work?"

For a moment they hesitated; he would've, too, probably, with no way of knowing what was waiting for them upstairs. But Steve couldn't find any other option.

With visible disgust, Dustin pressed a button covered in slime that dropped down from one of those plant tendrils. Steve would've done it himself, if hadn't needed both hands to carry El (two hands that felt how horribly thin that girl was, as if she'd been starving for a long, long time; with her weight pressing down, Steve could feel

every rib and every bone beneath her skin — should they get outside, he resolved to put her at the Wheeler's table for some of that chicken, and after that maybe he'd take her to a fast food place. That girl needed a meal).

"We've got both supercomms, and therefore no way to contact Nancy or Jonathan," Dustin argued as the door slid open, horribly creaking while it did so, "and we've probably been everywhere here at least twice, so I guess it's our best option."

It was hard to say if anyone was actually swayed by that line of thought, or just glad that someone had said what to do now. Especially Lucas seemed to give a sigh of relief as his unspoken position of command was taken down.

Slowly they got in, trying not to think of stories with elevators falling down deep shafts. Whatever this contraption was, it definitely wasn't safe any longer. Half of it had been eaten away by corrosion, and the other half was sort of shiny or sparkling, as if someone'd vomited plant goo on it.

Dustin pressed another button. The doors audibly struggled to close. Their motors seemed to sigh in relief when their task was done.

Good luck down there, Nance, Johnny boy, Steve thought as his vision of the hallway was obscured.

Then, with a sudden yank upwards, their little cabin began to move. Creaking noises worming their way into his head, Steve struggled to ban any thoughts of snapping cables from his mind.

Instead he carefully sat El down, and took his bat back from Dustin. *In case we're met with soldiers.* Fat luck it'd do them against gunfire, but maybe if he'd be quick ...

While they drove further along silence reigned between the five remaining members of their party. Mike tried to wipe the blood from his face. Lucas had taken out another stone, and loaded his slingshot with it, standing next to Steve in case of trouble. *No*, Steve thought, *wrist-rocket, that thing's called a wrist-rocket.* He'd seen it take a man's eye out, for Christ's sake.

Dustin struggled to get El up. Maybe he'd decided that now it was on him to carry her further.

"Mike? Will?" Suddenly a voice cut through their silence of poorly-suppressed fear. *El*.

Mike was with the girl in a moment, again telling her that she wasn't any monster.

By the time the elevator ground to a halt El was fully back on her feet.

Creaking terribly, its doors slid open once more. Steve wouldn't have been surprised if someone told him that the thing would never move again.

No soldiers. Thank God for small mercies. This hallway here lay silent, but it was also clean, a welcome change from the ones covered in monster-growth below. The air, too, seemed safe, without any blue pollen or spores or whatever the fuck floating around. Steve took his scarf off, thankful to be finally able to breathe again.

"I know where to go, now," El said, and stepped out into the hallway, the rest of them following not far behind her.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm not sure why, but Steve's a joy to write.

Any thoughts?

14. Will

Even when they left him alone, Will's head still screamed with bright, burning pain. Only much later did notice how much he must've thrashed around himself, when he noticed the bloodstains he'd left at the walls, and where it still trickled down his face. But that was later.

For now, Will didn't register a thing at all. Not consciously, at least. It was like staring into the sun, it drowned the rest of the world out. Entirely. For him, nothing existed but his own pain, not even he himself.

The *crunk* of the thick metal door being closed and locked found its way inside his mind, sure enough, but only as another wave of terrifying burning needles that were forced through his skull.

Will screamed, but he did not notice that, either; but he later supposed that he must've done so, when he discovered that his voice had gone.

Countless eternities, it seemed, passed while he lay there, with conscious thought only a dim memory floating lost deep in an ocean of screams.

Only slowly did Will find back to himself, and when he did he noticed that he couldn't move. Not one inch. Above him was a clean, bleak white tiled ceiling, and through thumping pain he thought he could make out a thick, unyielding mattress beneath him, too, but he couldn't move.

Minutes he spent trying to get himself in an upright position, or even just turn his head to the side, so he'd see more of the room that they'd locked him in, but he just *couldn't*. Merely thinking about moving his arm or head worked well enough, but his body just

wouldn't comply at all.

Instead, black spots turned up in his vision, threatening to overwhelm him when he put too much effort into moving. Once or twice he blacked out entirely. When he woke up again his skin still felt like it was burning, and sweat was trickling down his face and seeping through his clothes. It felt a bit as if he'd been thrown into ice water without warning, which didn't make even a lick of sense, but it was also the truth.

Pain, dampened now, less sharp, less *acute*, thumped through the back of his head like a terrible heartbeat. As if something was sneaking up on him, coming to get and eat him. Only he couldn't run away. Even if he'd managed to lift a finger he would've been able to; this wasn't any creature, this was his own fear, and his own pain.

Breathe, he told himself. That, at least, worked, though it brought a new wave of sweat with it as if he'd just been through an hour of PE lessons, bullying included, free of charge.

Thump. Thump. Thump. It might've lessened, but the pain was still there sure enough, drowning out any thoughts longer than a word.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Slowly, it seemed to ebb. Or maybe that was just his imagination. He had too much of that, he remembered that, someone'd told him that once, but now where'd that been? Will couldn't quite remember. Vaguely, an image of a kitchen floated before his eyes, and of a drawing, and a man shouting like mad.

What's that shit boy ever 'sposed to be, eh? All that drawing, all that fuck imagination, what good is it gonna do him out in the real world, can you explain that to me?

He couldn't see it clearly, a little as if there was a thick, foggy window between him and the scene, but dimly Will realized that this was his own kitchen, in his own home, and that this man was his

father.

Suddenly all the pain he felt seemed to drain from most of his body to concentrate in his left cheek, where his father'd struck him that day. *You gotta learn that, son! You hear me! The real world ain't gonna listen to any imagination crap, and you gotta learn that!*

It *hurt*. Every fiber of his being wanted to scratch that one cheek. Without thinking his hand lifted toward his face.

Oh. For a moment he had time to be surprised that he had actually moved. He got a glimpse of bone-white skin, then the arm fell down on his chest again, and a new wave of sweat and nausea rolled over his body. Eyesight reduced again, a black frame closing in around it.

'S just the Circulation, he realized. It must've gotten badly out of order during, during, during ... during what, actually? What had they done to him? Will couldn't remember.

Just wait, he told himself, *you wait for long enough, it'll catch up again, and you'll be able to move*. Slowly, his thinking got better, more complex again. Pain got less, too. Fear ... well, fear was another matter.

For some unfathomable reason, another image came to him, of a man lying on a black plastic slab of a bed, drained, in pain, just as Will himself was right now. A woman in white leaned over him, said something ... Will tried to focus on the man's head. There'd been a hat, hadn't there? Brown hair, and ...

No, he thought, *No head*. That man's name was Han Solo, and he lay on a black slab in a prison, after being tortured on Bepin. The hat belonged to someone else, but played by the same guy ...

Guess I have a pretty good idea, now, of how you felt, Han.

Yeah. If he pretended someone else was here with him, maybe he wouldn't feel so alone any more. No one here to call him a freak or weirdo for doing that, after all. *Advantages of being alone*. And since he couldn't move his head anyways, he might as well pretend that there was a friend right next to him whom he just couldn't see in this

position.

Breath, he told himself, *maybe that'll make it better*. In, slowly. Now out again. In once more, deep, until his lungs felt like bursting. Out again. And in. And so on.

Slowly, the world gained something like *realness*. Hard to explain, that one; just the feeling that he wouldn't drift off again at any moment, maybe. The tiled slabs above his head seemed more ... more *there*, too. As if someone'd set it into focus more properly.

Carefully Will tried turning his head. It took an effort, but worked fine. A short burst of sweat and heat through his body, but that was it. Better than before. He could see a door, now.

No imaginary Han there, though. Only the door, a short stretch of room, and clean white tiles everywhere. No woman in white there, either. What now? In a few minutes he'd be able to get up, probably, and what would he do then?

How did you get out of Bepin, Han?

Oh, yeah, right. Han didn't get out. Or rather, he did, but not on his own, and not in any manner that Will would be comfortable with.

Weakly, Will sat up. Every inch of his skin still itched, and sitting up turned out to be hard work. Slowly, he forced the upper part of his body upright. Use the arms for support, yeah, like that. No don't fall over again. Okay, great, you've done it. Shaky, but Will sat upright now. He could still feel where they'd ... they'd ... Will still couldn't remember. How had even gotten here in the first place?

For that matter, *where* was he at all? Clean white rooms weren't all that unique, in his experience. Hospitals had them, sometimes schools.

HAWKINS LAB, the answer came, sharp and suddenly. Huh. Where'd that been from?

Well, whatever. He'd find that out later. First, *breathe*. He was sitting up now, correct, that'd worked fine, but God did it feel like he'd just run a murderous sprint. *Can't even sit up properly, can you, you little fag* —

— *Shut up!*

He had no time for that, not now. *Get out of my head, Troy, or dad, or whoever you are*. Now that he wasn't lying down any more, unable to move, Will felt a bit stronger, too. Still, better not move much more, for the moment, or he'd black out flat again.

Breathe, he reminded himself. If he did that with enough conviction, maybe he'd recover from ... well, from whatever they'd done to him. Somehow he'd slipped into a sort of strange detachment from himself. There was still pain, but it didn't *hurt* so much. Will was aware that every inch of his body would protest violently should he try to walk, or even just stand up; in fact, he still felt it thumping and throbbing even when he *didn't* move, but it didn't overpower his thoughts anymore. It was just there.

Will was aware that he was in pain, he just didn't feel it as much anymore. Weird, maybe, but it also meant he could think more properly than before, had his head clearer. As long as he didn't move, of course.

Okay. Hawkins Lab. A cell. That was, in rough terms, his situation right now. Wistfully he imagined finding a ventilation shaft, or simply smashing the whole thing to pieces ... *No. You're not an X-Man. And how'd you suppose climbing ventilation shafts, in this state?* Now that he had the chance to use his mind for a moment, he'd better not waste it on some impossible fantasy.

Was there anything else that might be important? Any irregularities, any bumps in these clean white slabs, anything? Slowly, Will let his eyes gaze over the entire room, or at least over the part that he could see without turning around.

No. Nothing at all. Nothing, except —

It wasn't anything of the sort that he'd been hoping for that his eyes stuck at, refusing to go any further. It wasn't even part of the room. It was his own arm, limply lying across his lap, or rather, the color of its skin.

Will had forever been a pale boy, but this ... that arm didn't look like it used to. This arm was white as a corpse's. Whiter than white. Almost blueish. Carefully, Will concentrated on moving his fingers, one after the other. Just a short jerk, every time, to see that they still worked, from pinkie all the way through thumb. For a moment he intensely reminded himself of Luke Skywalker, testing his new synthetic hand on the Rebel Alliance ship hiding outside the galaxy.

Except he didn't live in Star Wars, and there'd be no replacement should this hand ever give up.

Thankfully that didn't matter. Everything seemed to work fine, even if slower than normally, as if someone'd turned down the intensity of his own feelings and abilities.

Circulation, he reminded himself. The arm just didn't get its usual supply of blood, subtracting all the red from its mix of colors, leaving only bone-white as its color. Will knew drawing, and he knew how colors worked; and for the moment, at least, he was satisfied with that explanation.

Something must've shaken him badly, then; whatever it was that they'd done to him, it appeared his body hadn't agreed with it.

Or something else is sucking in all the blood.

He hoped that wasn't the case, but in this crystal-clear state of numb detachment, Will didn't much care either way. In whatever this was, his own troubles were no more than a theoretical problem to be solved, no more and no less. But he could also not deny that it was a possibility. If the thing inside him ... it had been growing, he realized; that's why he'd been sick this morning ... or was that even this morning anymore? How long had he been here, screaming his heart out?

Okay, think about it ...

But all the thinking had tired him out again, and Will's mind shut up for the moment.

Times, long times it seemed, Will just drifted. There was, after all, nothing much to do. He stared at the door, closed. Like a trapdoor; and he was in the trap well and truly now.

Will floated. He wasn't sure how, or where, or if this was even real, but the sensation of floating through some gigantic void room could not be denied.

His eyes might still see the bare cell, blank and bleak as it was, but he was sure of floating all the same.

Floating.

What a nice feeling.

Just lean your head back and enjoy. Really, what was there he should care about? No chance of escape either way.

His eyes couldn't see it, but the rest of his mind did sure enough. It felt like ... like ... well, like floating. No other way to describe it, really. Floating through some vast dark space. Vast, but not empty. Countless planes and objects floated by him like stars on a mildly interesting, bumbling voyage past other realities that they didn't care about.

Turning his (*his what? Will guessed it was best described as his sight, even if it wasn't with his eyes that he saw it; those still stared down a bleak white cell in HAWKINS LAB, after all*) sight around, Will tried to take it all in. There were whole universes just scurrying past him like cats sneaking through the night, and others glowing brightly, as if they thought that their presence was something special. Some where

jumbled up, in strange shapes that he'd never seen before and would never see again. Some were connected, by long, thin strands pulsating through the void.

Gates, he thought, but didn't know why.

Right in that moment he would've been the best geometrist in the entire universe. Will stared into the heart of reality, and could comprehend everything there was. More than three dimensions? Who even cared? Non-euclidean? Piece of cake.

Turning his sight (?) further, he looked past those strange places and worlds, deep into the skin and being of time and space itself. There were planes filled full with life, and others, floating majestically past him, dead in their entirety. There were great heights, vastness, and deadlights. Space streamed through his mind and awareness, crushing it easily, like a nut, and Will welcomed it. Once, he thought he'd seen (*felt? sensed? His eyes still saw only the cell*) an enormous turtle, far out. It seemed to wink at him, sadly.

Then Will moved further, and back again. He could see Hawkins, and his school, then his home. Not much farther, and then there'd be Hawkins Lab, as well. *No*. There he'd see himself, and Will didn't want that.

Come to me, my boy, something seemed to whisper. *Come to me*.

Grateful for the distraction, grateful for the invitation, Will turned away again, away from this plane that he called *home*. Parts of it, he observed, where in a disgustingly bad shape, anyways, a world bent into strange loops and turns and hanging by a hundred thousand threads together with another. One look at it, and Will knew, and turned his sight away from that one again. He'd spent too much time there already.

And right in between the two ... Against a background of cosmic vastness and presence, something ate its way through the void, from one world to another.

Come to me, it whispered.

Gladly, Will swam towards it. So many directions to turn in here, it took him some time to reorient himself. As he got closer he saw that it was enormous, a gigantic long presence making its way through the void. An inconceivable being worming its way, with six, long, sharp claws through the darkness of the universe of universes. Half of it still stuck in the other plane, the other world, the one that they'd called the Upside Down, but the front had almost reached Will's home. And it moved further still, and *fast*.

Come to me.

Will did.

As they began their dialogue, Will's eyes might've still stared at the steel door in the clean white cell, but Will himself was far away.

Once he reappeared, Will *remembered*. Everything. He remembered lying in his bed during the afternoon, saying goodbye to Mike. *Again*. Again, they'd been talking about DnD.

Again he hadn't said anything of significance, or anything satisfying. Again he'd gone out of his friends' lives without even a hint of a warning. He'd thought about that often, when he'd been ...

Gone, he thought, *no use kidding yourself now. That's what you were, gone and dying, and it's probably what you're right now, too*. Part of him wanted to start singing again. *Should I stay or should I go now?*

Well, no use in asking that question. There was, after all, truly nowhere to go, not here. In the Upside Down, at least there'd been *space*; he'd been able to *walk*, and pretend that going somewhere else did anything in his favor. Here, there wasn't even that. Just a cube, white, tiled, windowless. Closed.

Will, remembered the doorbell ringing, too, his mum's voice, suspicious, and then the door slamming closed again. Not that she'd

stood a chance, of course. In the books that he'd read that had sometimes been a sort of rite of passage, learning that one's mother was neither infallible nor invulnerable. Mothers were humans like everybody else, who could be tricked and beaten like anyone else. Not for him, though; he couldn't remember any time when he hadn't known that. His father'd always taken care of that for him.

After that ... well, there wasn't much. Some nice and some not-so-nice conversation between his mum and the soldiers, and the man in white. He'd attempted to speak to Mike on the supercomm, but by the time he'd reached it they'd already been inside his room. From their side, they would've heard no more than a slight cracking ...

He'd been dragged from his bed (Will would've liked to say he'd been dragged kicking and screaming, but that was not the truth. He had been carried, tired, drained, and resigned to his fate). They'd given his mum the choice of either following or staying put. *Accompanying*, they'd called that, like it was just a regular trip to a regular doctor, and the little boy might be scared of a vaccination or something.

Except normal doctors didn't force you to comply with their wishes. Also they took cash, and an inordinate amount of that, from what he'd gathered (they never told him, but Will could see the sigh and resentment clear enough in his mother's eyes each time, and he'd count the extra shifts she and Jonathan would do afterwards). But better cash than this.

Oh, and of course there was the minor issue that they didn't lock one up in a cell like this one, and certainly not in the state that he'd been in when they'd closed the door. Even now, moving was still an effort, but when he brought his hands up to the sides of his head, Will could feel how the skin'd been thrown into waves there. He'd have expected that touching it would result in more pain, but strangely, it didn't. Maybe there just wasn't anything left to register the touch at all. Lifting his shirt, he could see the same marks on his belly, too. Skin, thrown in wrinkles, parts of it almost burned, the rest red; a stark contrast to the otherwise bone-white surroundings of it. Those, too, didn't seem to register his touch anymore.

No pain at all. There was nothing there left to *feel* pain, at all.

Staring at his own skin but not really seeing, Will drifted off again. Anything was better than seeing himself in ruins, from where they'd connected him to ... well, to whatever. *Electric power line* might cut it, but truly he didn't know, he wasn't some technician, after all. He was just a boy, stuck. Again. Possibly dying. Also again.

Floating, he found, things looked easier. More ... set into proportion. When you had the whole overwhelming enormity of the cosmos in your head, then your own problems weren't nearly as important as they otherwise seemed. At least for the moment, that made them much easier to deal with. Take that turtle, for example, that he thought he'd seen drifting through the distance, before, would it care about one small little boy like him? Would any of the distant stars or worlds or deadlights? 'Course not. Don't be stupid.

So really, what was all the fuss about? He'd live here for a while, and he'd be in pain, and sooner or later he'd die, but overall it didn't matter one bit. On such a scale, absolutely *nothing* mattered even one tiny bit. A bit of a comforting thought, really.

Or so thought the part of him that was floating through space, that gazed into the infinite abyss of scale and the marcoverse.

Eternity could've passed, then, and Will wouldn't have taken any note of it at all. And maybe an eternity *did* pass, before he finally headed back to himself, and directed this whatever-it-was vision first on his own earth, and then onto Hawkins Lab itself. Drifting past, he thought he'd seen a hungry wink from the eerie creature chewing its way through the cosmos towards his home, but Will didn't pay attention to it any more. He was looking on Hawkins Lab itself.

Here, from this, directions were plentiful. No lack of vision, then; he saw the gray cube-like buildings as if they were a map, except that no one'd had to sacrifice a dimension to make it possible. He saw the entire structure, just as it was, in all three dimensions embedded into

the multitudes of space. He saw *everything*, and *everyone*. He didn't see *through* walls, he saw *around* them, the way he ordinarily might've looked down on a heap of ants and seen more than they, from their own perspective. He even saw ...

And with this, suddenly, the calm feeling of floating shattered into pieces and popped like a balloon. Suddenly, Will felt fear again, fear of what might yet still happen. Not for himself, but for whom he saw so close to him.

His mum he'd expected to see. She'd come with him, after all. Mr. Clarke ... for a terrible moment he'd thought the science teacher might have ties to this Department of Energy, before seeing that the man was just as locked up as his mum was. In the same room, in fact. That alone would've been surprise enough.

But his amazement — and his terror — grew further still when he spied Mike there as well, and El, carried by Steve, who himself stood shoulder to shoulder with Lucas and Dustin. Together they stood in an elevator, and slowly moved to the upper level of this complicated complex of a building. And behind them, in the lowest corridors of the basement, Nancy and Jonathan seemingly patrolled the hallways.

For a moment Will contemplated a mistake. Maybe he'd drifted off and into sleep, or the electricity had taken his mind as well as his skin. But now, that couldn't be; it might be irrational, sure, but Will very much felt with certainty that this all was real, this new vision of his really was absolute, and complete, and not wrong, ever. He could see any detail anywhere in the world down to the atoms and the particles that made those. He could stare into the heart of the universe and feel the flows of gravity and electromagnetic fields through space itself, and knew that they were one and the same. There could be no mistake.

No, this was all real, and that was the truth. They were, in fact, really here, and that, then, was the truth as well.

Fear, he thought. *What a strange feeling*. It was like it crept through his mind for the first time, like he'd never had to deal with it before. And it was fear for those people whom he could see here, fear for what might yet happen to them. He'd stopped caring about himself

sometime while further out in the void.

But he could see the men in white, too, and the guards with their guns. Nothing good would come of them, of that he was sure. And Will was afraid.

And what good is all this knowledge, if I can't change anything?

Except ... maybe he could do something. He hadn't tried until now, after all.

He saw the elevator with Mike and El and the others bumble to a rattling halt, and then watched as El opened her eyes again.

His own cell was now not much more than a long-distant memory. His eyes still provided him with a bland and uninteresting picture of it, like a photograph of a white, tiled room that Will didn't even grace with a look. His own body was still there, of course, but the worries about circulation and blood pressure or dead skin had gone from his mind and slipped into the endless waters of oblivion. Everything of him was focused on El, and that he might help them get his mum and Mr. Clarke out of this hellish facility.

Straining himself, Will reached out, and showed El the way.

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, so there's some weird shit in this chapter. I'm not sure if I'm good at that ...

In any case, here's Will again!

I borrowed a few words from Stephen King here, you might've noticed ("deadlights", "macroverse"; to my knowledge no one else has ever really used those besides him). The turtle might be from *IT*, I guess, though I actually thought more of the one from *Discworld* while writing this. Please don't ask me what shape my multiverse is, I honestly have no idea (though I'm pretty sure it's probably hyperbolic, and certainly not an affine space — though actually, it might be a projective plane. That'd be pretty cool,

got a universe where no parallel lines exist! Or, well, were they *actually* meet at infinity. Navigation would be a pretty cool problem, then. Actually, is there such a thing as an hyperbolic space that's also projective, or that can be extended to be? That'd be *really* cool. Also would have LOTS of space. I'm just not sure if it exists without contradicting itself somewhere ...)

Any thoughts on the chapter? Anyone here know more about hyperbolic spaces than I do, and can tell me if you can extend one to be projective as well?

15. Joyce

Rationally, Joyce knew that screaming was useless here, but by the time she stopped her throat was raw all the same. She'd been here before, had maybe even been cuffed to very same table in the exact same room; by now, Joyce Byers knew how this worked. For a long time there'd be nothing at all, then someone'd come in, make an oh-so-very-nice offer which she'd inevitably refuse, and after that they'd try it with force. She *knew* that. That'd been the way Lonnie had done it, that'd been the way Dr. Brenner'd done it, and whoever was in charge now would do it as well.

She just wished it would be easier to actually *act* on that knowledge. Instead she'd been screaming her voice out. Instead, she'd chosen to go with Will (*her Will, her poor, poor and brave boy*) in hopes of helping him through this, somehow. Instead she'd believed them when they told her she'd be able to be there every step of the way. With no other option, it had seemed the best choice to her, so she'd taken it; and it infuriated her that she'd been so dumb, so naive.

Of course she hadn't been allowed anywhere near her son. They'd both gone into one car, and then they'd both been dragged out of it into different directions upon arrival at the lab. She hadn't seen Will since.

Oh, damn it, but she *knew* this game, and hated herself for not recognizing it sooner when they'd coated it into a nice new sugary disguise.

My Will, she thought, and, *at least I left the code, for Jonathan, so he'll know what happened*. Except by now she wasn't sure about that, either. Rules, especially those set down by others, they'd be the bane of her, one day. No matter how wrong a situation seemed, it was almost always easier to stick to them and hope it'd work out. If she was unsure at any moment, she was fell back on them. That'd been how it'd gone with Lonnie, for years, before she'd finally had enough and thrown him out her life, preferably to never be seen again. But before that had been ages where she'd thought *we're married, and he's the father of Will and Jonathan, he'll come around*. And then she'd give him another chance, because that was what the rules told her to do.

Married couples were supposed to be happy, after all, and to accept that this wasn't always the truth had taken her a long time. *Too* long, in truth, and now her sons (and she herself) carried the scars.

Yes, she'd left that coded message for Jonathan. Only she knew her boys, and she knew how he'd react. Maybe it'd happened already, but Joyce had a sickening certainty in her mind that by tomorrow morning at the latest her other boy would be in the clutches of Hawkins Lab as well, arrested while demanding that his brother be set free, or else caught when trying to sneak into the facility on his own. And that was worse even than letting herself slip into this again; she'd probably dragged *others* into it, as well, and her son, no less. And there was nothing, absolutely *nothing*, that she could do about that, now.

So all that was left to her was screaming, and hate for herself.

Ages seemed to pass while she was alone, with only dark suspicions concerning the fate of her sons.

When the door opened again, Joyce Byers was ready to face them. Whatever nice little promise they'd come up with this time, she'd see right through it. She'd tell them to go and fuck themselves, that she'd agree to absolutely nothing before she didn't have her Will back in her arms.

She would've stood up, too, except for the cuffs connecting her to her chair.

The door was thrown open with a crash. Two guards walked through. Joyce remained silent; she'd wait for their boss.

A third guard came in, closely followed by a man in more civilian clothing.

"Listen, you —" her anger was gone in an instant. Her determination

was, too; she hadn't foreseen this.

A short rattling of keys, the sound of metal scraping on metal as handcuffs were opened and then closed again; and only moments after that the guards were gone again. To Joyce Byers they left only confusion. She'd have expected that man in the white coat again, or at least someone speaking in that monster's place, but —

But this was Scott Clarke sitting right next to her, handcuffed just as she was, his face pale as if he'd just stared death in the eye. There was a splatter of blood on his neck, and his eyes seemed strangely absent.

For almost half a minute his mouth worked aimlessly. Then, finally, he asked her a question.

"It's true, then? They've taken Will?"

Only six words, but God, did they hurt her. When she nodded, Joyce was on the verge of starting to sob again.

His face, if anything, became only paler, more fearful. The man looked like he might black out at any moment.

It made her angry, almost. *You've got no right to feel so bad about this, she half wanted to scream at him, he's not your son, and don't you dare to presume that you could even imagine how I feel right now.*

She swallowed those words. No, she would not lower herself to that level. She would *not* play into this game any further, and start an entirely pointless shouting match with the one person beside herself in this who was on the same side. It was hard, but Joyce was nothing if not determined. She was good at being determined. Long years with Lonnie had given her training enough.

It still took time before she could speak again. When she felt that she could, Joyce took a deep, calming breath and started to explain.

"He's been looking a bit pale all weekend — paler than usual, that is — so when he woke up this morning I told him I wouldn't let him go to school today no matter what he said — normally he insists on going anyway, no matter how bad he looks, so ..."

It was hard, saying these few stumbled sentences, but she knew that they were still the easy part. Here, she could pretend she was just a mother explaining to her son's teacher why her boy hadn't been at school today. It could've been an apologizing phone call, so far, but she had to tell the rest of the story as well. She sighed before continuing.

"So I had him stay home with El while I went to work, and then —" Joyce sighed again. "I was *there* when they came; El'd just left, with Mike and the others, to the Wheelers' house, and ... they said it might have something to do with, you know ..." she trailed off again, hoping he'd catch her meaning; she'd been in that *you know*-place herself, after all, and didn't want to bring it up directly.

But wait, there was something else, too, something ...

"I think they know about El," she said, finally. "That man in the lab coat, he asked several times if there was anyone else at home, if there was anything — now, he phrased it nicely, of course; asked if there was anyone to stay behind and tell Jonathan, or ... well, he got less nice towards the end, when he had us dragged out. But I think he knew, or at least suspected."

Joyce sighed again. This day had been way too tiring, and by now her wrists were hurting badly from where the handcuffs pressed on them. She fell silent again.

"I walked in here," he told her suddenly. "After class today Dustin came to show me a map of Hawkins; he'd discovered magnetic field lines all over town. So I went out during the afternoon to chase them down, and ... well, in one local center of it I found a — a gate, you might call it, to —"

He said "The Vale of Shadows" in the same instant she said "The Upside Down," then looked surprised. "Huh? I thought we were calling it the Vale of Shadows, after the DnD concept. At least, that's what the boys asked me about, on Will's funeral. Although I guess that *the Upside Down* is probably also a good name, though I can't think of why right now ..."

"It was something to do with a game board, I think," she supplied,

trying to be helpful “turning it upside down, where there was more space, something like that.” She’d never quite understood the boys’ hurried explanations.

“Ah,” he said, “makes sense.” Joyce was lost there, but then science had never really been her thing. “In any case, I stumbled into this lab without knowing where I was, and ... well, I think you can guess the rest. Guess I’m really more a theorist than field worker.” There was a sadness in that last sentence that Joyce knew well. She looked at the bloody gash in his neck.

“I think they used a tranquilizer on me ...” For a moment his face was a wince of pain.

“But one thing: I’m almost sure at this point that it isn’t over yet.” She looked at him, incredulous. “Oh, not just *this* —” his cuffs, fastened at the back of his chair, made a rattling noise, as if he’d tried to gesture at something before remembering it wouldn’t work when his hands were tied; for a moment his face showed pain again — “the Upside Down. There’s something there coming towards here, and given the records I’d be surprised if that was a good thing.”

Ah. Joyce resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Of course Will being abducted wasn’t enough yet, why am I even surprised? Somehow, however bad things got, they’d find a way to get worse. Yeah, well. She’d come to terms with that a long fucking time ago, and all she cared for now was to get her son back.

Fuck you, Lonnie, she thought.

In their shared cell, every moment seemed to stretch out endlessly. Scott had a watch around his wrist, which she could just barely get a look at, bound to her chair as she was. Occasionally she’d glance at it, just to be shocked how little time had gone by.

Not even midnight, yet.

Joyce was tired from the day, from seeing her Will taken away again, from screaming through imprisonment. Her wrists were raw from the sharp metal handcuffs biting into her skin, her entire body hurting from sitting still for so long.

And yet she didn't spend even the smallest thought on sleep.

They'd come, she was still sure, they'd come to offer her some nonsense *choice*, and she'd have to be ready for them when they did.

Except that with every hour that passed by without the door opening her resolve got weaker. Next to her, Scott had already dozed off once, though by now he was awake again.

"What are they waiting for?" She wondered aloud. *Why haven't they come in hours ago, trying to strike some deal?*

It seemed like ages before he offered an answer.

"Maybe they're not waiting for anything," he said, "maybe they've just forgotten that we're here. When I came in from the Upside Down half the facility was overgrown, entire hallways covered beneath ... well, beneath plants, I'd guess, plants from the Upside Down."

"So?" Joyce couldn't see his point.

"Maybe they're having trouble even keeping this thing running. If half of the building's unusable or even toxic ..." he trailed off again.

Joyce hadn't thought of that. He continued: *If they're focusing everything on keeping it alive at all, if they're almost finished already, then ... then ...*

"But why take Will, then?" It felt weird, almost cruel, to even ask that question, to even consider this from their point of view; but she knew that she had to if she wanted to gain at least *some* understanding. "why ... *expand* the program when they're already having trouble?"

For a long while silence reigned again, as they pondered that question.

“Funding,” Scott said at last. “that’s the only thing I can think of.”

Her astonishment must’ve been self-evident, and he quickly hurried to explain. “Scientific research —” he put a scorn into these two words that would’ve made God himself tremble — “gets its funding based on results. The more papers a scientist writes, and the more those are quoted by his peers, the likelier he or she is to get funding for further project, or get offered a job or a position as professor somewhere. In short, the more papers, the more respect. I’d guess its similar with these things that the government put up; whoever can convince the authorities they’re doing more so that we stay ahead of the East gets more money.”

“And so far, this lab has produced only one ‘experiment,’ and that escaped,” Joyce said, slowly understanding.

“Yes, El. And in the process they wrecked half the building, lost half of their staff ... so I guess if they think they can prove something with Will, they’re desperate to do it, no matter the cost.”

It was weird, somehow, diving into what motivated the other side like this. And also disgusting. Who’d put a human life beneath what was basically a lottery for money? If anything, her hate for Hawkins Lab had only increased with that discussion.

Her chances at getting out, though, had probably diminished as well. If all this was true, then maybe they’d be stuck here until the building would just fall apart. Possibly they’d also get eaten by that hideous growth that’d come through the gate, courtesy of Brenner’s era here. Hard as it was to accept, Joyce realized that there was a very real possibility that they’d both die in here.

“Well,” she said, “in case this is it, I just ... I just wanted to thank you, for everything you did for El.” She paused, then added, “I’m sorry I couldn’t pay you for any of it.”

He gave a weak smile. “I don’t care about that,” he said, “’s long as I could show her that science doesn’t necessitate ... this.” His cuffs clinked again as he tried gesturing.

After that they both fell silent again. Slowly, as time crept by, Joyce

thought that maybe she'd began hallucinating. Where those meek sounds she thought to hear steps in the hallway outside? Was that Mike's voice, or maybe Steve's or Dustin's, sounding muffled from coming through the wall? Was that Lucas shouting, and then hammering against the door?

No, surely that wasn't possible.

Joyce still wasn't sure she believed it when the door broke open and violently crashed against the wall outside, letting light from the corridor stream into their dark cell. Dust flew up and for a moment prevented her from seeing who was outside.

Then Steve stepped through it, a bat full with nails and blood in hand, closely followed by Mike, Dustin and Lucas, who had blood on his face and one hand on El's shoulder, steadying her, as though he feared she might fall over otherwise.

It took her a moment before she'd actually realized that all of that had, in fact, really just happened, that there was really a bunch of kids storming Hawkins Lab, and that that bunch of kids included her not-quite daughter El and her friends, and, for whatever reason, Steve Harrington. She didn't even know him very well; Jonathan had mentioned him a couple of times, which in itself was nothing short of astonishing, but otherwise ... last time she'd seen him must've been the hospital, when they'd been waiting for Will to wake up, and even then it'd just been a short hello.

"Wha — How ... " she stammered, utterly lost. There was a soft *clink*, and suddenly her hands were free again. El smiled at them. Dimly, she realized that it must've been her who'd opened the handcuffs. Her who'd crashed the door open.

"She led us here," Steve Harrington said, winking at El, as if that were both obvious and an explanation. Although he, too, was stunned for a moment when he saw who was beside her.

"Mr. Clarke?" Dustin sounded just as incredulous as Steve looked.

"Guess that explain why he didn't answer the phone," Mike whispered.

Meanwhile, Steve recovered from his shock, then put up a silly grin. “Oh man. How’re you holding up, science guy?”

Next to her, Scott Clarke groaned. Joyce ignored that. “Where to now?”

“Onward,” El answered her, quietly. “To find Will.”

Notes for the Chapter:

This one's a little shorter; but the next one will be longer again. Also, first of all, Mr. Clarke's obviously not dead, as some of may have thought; without him there'd be no one capable of explaining stuff, after all, and that'd be a rather heavy loss.

And the story's slowly wrapping up; there's maybe three more chapters coming up — well, it's already the single longest thing that I've ever written, so far (though I did have a trilogy of *A Song of Ice and Fire* fics that was longer in total).

Any thoughts?

16. Will & El

Basically blind, El led them through the maze of gray, bleak hallways. She wasn't actually sure what they thought that she was doing; maybe they believed she knew where all these ways went, from *before*, or that she could look through walls far enough to take in everything.

But the truth was, she didn't know anything at all. She didn't even know where she was going, really.

El just walked, and every now and then a low but strange sort of intuition would urge her to go right, or left, or to stop right in front of this door or that one. The truth was, El didn't know where they were going any more than they did. In fact, the only thing of note she'd done since waking up in that elevator had been smashing in the door to Will's mum and Mr. Clarke, and then opening the handcuffs. Besides that she just followed something (or *someone* else's lead).

It was as if she was in a deep dark tunnel, following only one small spot of light that she could occasionally glimpse through the darkness. It was hard to be sure why she even trusted those directions, but somehow she did. There was something ... familiar ... about it, something comforting. They definitely didn't come from herself, or from anyone else present; she knew that much, at least, but the rest was a mystery, even to her. There was no way to put it into words, but El was absolutely sure that it meant no harm.

And she had proof of that, now, as well; they'd found Will's mum and Mr. Clarke, and now their group had grown to seven again.

Carefully, El stepped through the next few feet of hallway. Everything here was familiar; everything looked the same, and every inch of it was drenched in memories that she tried very hard to ignore. She was almost sure that she'd never even been in this section of the complex before; it even looked subtly different from what she remembered: maybe a slightly different gray on the walls, or the light just a little more yellow. Still, it was similar enough to almost make her loose herself. Down below, where it'd all been broken apart and grown over, that had been easier for her. But here, everything was

still intact, and still looked like it'd done before she'd ... *fled*, she supposed was the right word. Not that any word would ever be able to convey what that day had truly felt like.

And now she was back.

Except she wasn't alone now. While she walked further along the route that mysteriously formed in her head Lucas was beside her, with one hand on her shoulder, and whenever her shivers got bad enough that she almost stumbled he'd keep her steady and stop her from falling over. And on her other side was Mike, her hand held in his, a constant reminder that even though she was here she wasn't *here*, not like she'd been before. She was not alone, here, and none of the people with her wished her harm.

That way, together, the three of them led the rest of the group.

Right, now, she felt the urge again. El turned her head to look. The hallway splitting of this one to the right was short, clean and tiled the same as the others were, but it ended abruptly at an elevator. The same broken old rusted thing they'd used to get up on this level of the complex. Whoever led her wanted her to go back out.

For a short moment, El hesitated. *No*, she thought.

Then she walked along, forwards, leaving the elevator behind. Mike and Lucas followed, and she could hear the rest coming after them as well.

No! Right, I told you to go right!

Determined, El walked further still. The elevator meant the exit, and she wasn't ready to go yet. Together they were seven now, when they really should've been eight.

At the next junction she felt no urge to turn anywhere, so El just continued walking. But by the time she'd reached the one after that it was back, almost physically pressing her to turn right. Again, El walked on, down another gray corridor, dimly lit by clean white lights.

Not without Will, she thought, defiantly, hoping that whoever was

sending her those directions would hear her. Next to her Lucas and Mike walked beside her as if nothing had changed, and behind them the others probably hadn't even noticed that anything at all had changed.

Come one, El thought, *where do I have to go?*

And suddenly she knew. She wasn't even sure if it was the same urge as before, or something else that now directed her. Maybe it was really just her own fear, and her own suspicions. Her own memories, perhaps. But for the first time since stepping foot inside Hawkins Lab this evening El felt ... well, *back*. Down the elevator, in the large hall with the bathtub, everything had been changed, entire walls had cracked open long ago, had been overgrown and covered in plant-like tendrils reaching there from the Upside Down. It'd still been frightening, true, but not nearly as bad as she'd feared it would be, seeing that place again. Up here, all the hallways and corridors might look the same, but they also *weren't*. Unconsciously, she'd known the whole time that they were in a different section of the building, not in the one where she'd lived (*if one can even call it "living"*).

Except that'd changed, now. She *knew* this hallway, knew it like the back of her hand. El wouldn't even been able to say how exactly this one differed from the others; it just *did*. Somehow. She knew she'd been here before, and now she also knew where she had to go. It was obvious in her mind; in this part of the building there were only two rooms of particular interest to anyone. Especially for someone hiding (holding) a child.

No, she thought, *no, please not*.

For a moment El almost stumbled, then stopped walking.

"El? You okay?" That was Mike, concern all over his face. His hand squeezed hers a little, reassuring her. *I'm not alone*, she thought. It was nice to have a reminder. Not that it made things easier to do, it just made them easier to bear.

For what she had to do next might've been the hardest thing she'd ever done, but defiantly El took another step forwards, and then another, and another, until slowly she was walking again. The

hallway around her seemed to press in on her. She could hear her Papa's voice again: *Eleven, I was worried about you, come back, I can make you well again, safe again ...*

No. Dr. Brenner was dead; and if any human had ever been a monster, that it'd been him, not her. El shuddered, but took another step forwards. *Towards.*

I'm coming, Will. We are coming. Don't worry. Something in her stirred comfortably, maybe the thing that'd given her directions before, but she got a feel of anxiety, too, and that wasn't just her own, either.

Surer now, El walked further down the hallway, her friends following close behind. And then, suddenly, she stopped dead again. Right around the next corner, behind a thick protective (*restrictive*) metal door stood a guard, hidden behind a door closing off the next corridor. El knew that the same way she knew that the floor was tiled or that Mike's hair was in disarray; she simply *looked*.

But Will said that no one except me can do that, she remembered. And even she could only do that maybe an arm's length or so; it might well be possible that there was a whole line of soldiers further down that hallway that were too far for her to see. But the room she had to get to was behind that thick metal door, supposedly secure.

"Nancy," she said, because Nancy was the one with the gun. Then she remembered that Nancy wasn't there any longer; she'd stayed in the lower level, rushing off with Jonathan close behind her. *They must've been hunting them, all this time,* she suddenly realized, *that's why we didn't meet anyone here.* Up until now.

Well, that was now over. Steve had evidently understood what she'd meant with saying Nancy's name, and come to a similar conclusion. Lucas caught on a moment later, taking a stone from his backpack and loading the wrist-rocket while Steve walked past him, nail-bat in hand.

He positioned himself just in front of the corner. She could see Lucas's hand shivering, and heard Steve breathing heavily.

"I'm ready," Steve said.

“Me too,” Lucas added.

El took a deep breath; she didn’t like this, not at all. But there didn’t appear to be any other way, and ...

Before Will’s mum had a chance to ask what they were doing El let the heavy metal gate slid to its side.

There was a short yelp of surprise, then Steve’s bat struck home. Lucas leaped around the corner and let the stone fly on the next guard further down the hallway. Then both doubled back, as gunfire came to greet them. El helped, too; time was vital here to let them survive, and she dragged them back behind the corner before anyone had a chance of shooting them.

Shuddering, the whole group pressed against the wall just next to where that hallway branched off, trying hard not to just bolt from fear. The noises filled El’s head completely, overpowering everything else and slowly threatening to overwhelm her. She had to try very hard not to just dissolve into mindless, helpless screams, but given how loud it was around her she couldn’t even be sure if she was succeeding. Maybe she was already crying and just couldn’t hear it. There were certainly screams filling the air, but she wasn’t sure if those were hers or maybe Mike’s, or maybe even those of Joyce or Mr. Clarke.

Finally, after a seemingly endless time they stood there pressed to the wall, the shots ceased.

Will, she thought. Still shaking, she took a step forwards, away from the protecting wall and towards the corner. For a moment Lucas looked like he might follow her, and Steve, though his face was a mask of fright and fear almost made a step forward, towards the corner. Will’s mum was sobbing hysterically while Mike was just deathly pale; maybe it would’ve been better to warn the others first, El thought too late. Mr. Clarke looked close to screaming, or maybe crying.

“Stay,” she told them all. She could hear Will’s mum scream for her to stay, but walked on regardless of that.

Then she stepped around the corner, and into the hallway beyond. Five guards stood there still, with two already lying on the ground in front of the others, unmoving. A few shots were fired, but stopped dead in the air once within arm's reach of her, and blood began trickling down her nose again. When the soldiers saw that what they did wouldn't work the bad men threw their guns away and came for her with fists and batons. The first she easily knocked from his feet before he'd even reached her, and the second as well; but then she herself stumbled over the men already on the ground and almost fell.

The third one's baton hit her with full force into the chest before she'd even noticed it and threw her flat on the ground. Something cracked, an awful sound to hear. El managed to get rid of him as well, but by then blood came rushing down her ears, and her sight almost gave out completely. She'd learned to calculate with Mr. Clarke, there should still be two of the bad men left, and she was helpless.

A second and third time she could dimly feel pain as someone thrashed into her back. El tried pushing them all away, but found that she'd already done too much. One more and maybe she'd die, and El was so, so *tired* already. At the very least she'd black out if she did anything, and if not for the hurt she felt everywhere she could've fallen asleep already, right that minute. *I've failed*, she thought miserably, then, and, *I'm sorry, Will*.

Next there was a crunch above her. Then a scream as something fell down. Then the same again. Someone else crying out in victory, and then El got lifted back to her feet and saw it was Steve who'd come and rescued her, Lucas close behind, still a stone in one hand and the wrist-rocket in the other.

"You're not alone, kiddo, you know," Steve told her. Lucas stood right next to him, an ugly blue spot on his head, but still ready to let a stone fly into one of the enemies at a moment's notice. Mike came rushing to her a mere second later, and held her safe. *I'm not alone, yes*, she thought, *and I wish that, for once, I could actually remember that*. Some things from before still towered over her life, it seemed. But less than before.

Slowly, and with help from Mike, El dragged herself back on her feet.

It wasn't far now, and the way was free as well.

Just past the pile of dead or passed-out soldiers where two doors; behind one was Will, behind that same door where El had lived for so long, and behind the other was darkness. Steve carried her there, and carefully, almost sleepy, El broke the lock open. Not much energy for anything else, now; otherwise she'd have thrown the whole heavy thing across the room. It would've felt good to smash any door to pieces in here, and especially this one. Alas, she couldn't do it now, when even walking was too much of an effort. Even while standing she needed Mike's support to stay upright, and had to fight for her eyes to remain open.

But behind this door was Will, and really that was all that counted. His mum rushed past Steve and El and Mike, trying to get in as fast as possible, with Dustin and Lucas following close behind. Mike, who still held her hand, looked torn for a moment, until El softly pushed him away. "Go to him," she would've said, but found that talking was beyond her for a moment. Steve remained where he was, halfway through the door, and held her in his arms, replacing Mike's support. Mr. Clarke still stood in the hallway outside, and looked as if he felt out of place.

Will, it turned out, was in a shape even worse than she was. His mum carried him out of the cell. He looked sicker even than he'd done earlier; his skin was now bone-white, only a shadow of how he normally looked. El only got a short glance at his face, but his eyes seemed distant, too, as if he was somewhere else entirely. But she recognized his presence as the one that'd led her to his mother and Mr. Clarke all the same. She tried not to think about the fact that he'd refused to lead her to his own cell.

I'll ask him later, she decided, so none of the others will have to know. Although El suspected that she already knew. I hadn't expected anyone to come, by then. I was just waiting; he'd told her that before, when thanking her for telling him that his mum was still looking for him, that she had almost found him.

Around her, the others slowly started to walk back down the hallway, towards the elevator. Steve half-carried her with them.

“Wait,” she managed to get out her mouth. Steve stopped immediately. “There ... there ...” Weakly, El tried pointing to the other door, the one that held darkness. Steve brought her there, safe in his arms.

Using the last bits of her strengths, El opened the lock, and Steve pushed the door wide open. Behind was a blank, featureless room, walls tiled the same as everything else here. The door was heavy, thick metal, but had evidently been damaged at some point; it had a slight dent in it. The room itself, though, had been restored. And with the door open, it wasn’t even dark inside. The blackness that she’d so feared was gone from her life.

Steve sat her down onto the ground.

El stared into the featureless room for a long, long time, and cried. There was really nothing else to do.

Mike came and laid a hand on her shoulder, and El grabbed it and held it tight.

She almost thought that she could hear Mike sobbing, too.

Finally, when she felt strong enough to stand by herself, she wiped the tears from her face. “We can go now,” she announced. Steve took her into his arms again, and carried her back down the hallways. Mike’s hand was still there, too, and she held it the entire way back.

Together, the three of them followed the others, Joyce still carrying Will. Dustin walked right next to her, doing faces, trying to cheer him up a little.

When they stepped into the elevator, El felt something else penetrating the walls of reality. And those walls, under stress, became thin only too quickly.

Down on the lower level they ran into more soldiers, but El could only dimly remember that, later. For her, nothing more seemed to exist than the presence pressing in on everything. It was a terror that she'd felt only once before; and back then it'd led her to flee the Upside Down no matter how dangerous that was.

It's here, she thought, desperate, but too weak to do much about it. *It's arriving.*

She could see Will struggling, too, thrashing out against the arms of his mum, his arms and legs beating first one way, then the other. His mother did everything she could to steady him and to continue to carry him, but the sheer force of his seizures quickly threatened to overpower her.

Suddenly, El realized. *He knows it, too. And so does the thing inside him.*

Behind them steps rang down the hallway, steps quickly followed by a the shot of a gun.

“Run!” That was Steve, who held her tighter as he began to run. The nail-bat he left falling to the floor, forgotten. Joyce, with Will, struggled as well, but held up with them all the same.

Together, they rushed out the hallway and into the huge overgrown chamber with the bathtub in its middle, and the original gate at its side.

Nancy Wheeler stood there, in the middle of the chamber, weapon in hand like some mad gunslinger of legend. *“Come on!”* she cried out to them as she let shots fly, holding the bad men off.

They hurdled across the small distance that separated them and took cover behind the ruins of the old bathtub. The glass above had shattered in places, but beneath that the thing was built on a solid base, and behind that they hid. Jonathan was there, and immediately

tried to take care of his brother, while Nancy remained on the outer side of it, shooting one round after another, only stopping every so often to reload.

Halfway to delirium, El lay down next to Will. The noise of gunfights pressed into her ears while blood was slowly drying on her face. El felt weaker than she'd done in a long while. *Should've brought some Eggos.*

Next to her, Will had foam on his mouth. Around them fragments of ceramic slabs were flying wild. The glass of the bathtub itself, strong as it was, shattered in several places while El and the others hid, lying down behind its socket for protection. Shards of glass rained down on them, and she couldn't even hold them off. One or two cut her face.

And Will was thrashing wildly around himself, seemingly without any control over himself, screaming. Once he spoke. "*El*," he called for her, trying hard to shout above his own screams. She could feel, could *see* the thing growing inside of him like a blossoming flower of terror, sprouting off new branches into every last cell of his being.

Suddenly Mr. Clarke was there, his face strained with blood and tears, his expression wild from fear. "*El*," he said, "I found something, out there. I think something's coming here, and —"

"It's coming," El confirmed for him, then pushed him aside to get to Will.

While the world was screaming around them, she took his hand and closed her eyes. It was hard, keeping his thrashing hand in hers, but she managed. And though at first she could still notice that he was jerking around violently, it slowly seemed easier. And she knew that she had to grip him tight to even have a chance at holding them together. But then that faded. The noise of gunfire disappeared as well. For a pure, dead moment there was nothing but the singular sensation of floating in absolute darkness; then El cried out.

Will was there, and with him the thing that grew inside him, both of them bound together inseparable. All three of them floated through the cosmic void that El knew so well. They were in contact, now.

They were where she'd first made contact with the Demagorgon. They were where people could talk to each other, if they knew how.

Will heard her, and knew that she was there even through the battle for dominance in his own mind. For a short moment he let the thing inside him pass over him, control him, let it seep into every last fiber of his being. It was ready, he realized, ready to make him serve its purpose. Suddenly he even realized what that was: he was to be a human landing beacon for the great monster screaming in on reality, a bright white light announcing *dinner's served!*. And for a moment, he let it do exactly that. And then he *turned*.

The air — if it was air, and not just the void around them — flickered, then sparks flew all around him.

A powerful bright bolt of something stove away from him, and out into the void towards the monster. *Take it!* he screamed. El could hear his voice thundering through her mind.

In later years, when she visited school and read more books; when she'd learned more about that strange world outside that was now and forever her home, El would come to describe what she had experienced next in terms of lightning strikes. Those, too, weren't as simple an event as they might look like from afar; at first there'd be a leading channel, forming first before the rest, coming down from the cloud and branching off in a hundred directions at once, searching for the best point to establish a connection with, attempting to find the shortest way to the ground all in a fraction of a second. And as she'd closed her eyes right now she could feel something similar making its way through the incredibly vast empty black territory she could access when concentrating, the space where she'd first met the Demagorgon all these months ago. Here it was, a thin, weak channel of *something* searching for a point to connect with, growing from the thing inside Will and out into the void.

El suspected that she knew where it was trying to get to, she could feel the huge monster closing in on them as much as if it'd stood right behind her and breathed down her neck. But it took longer than it should have. Will must have managed to give it a slight tilt when it'd reached out, and that was really all the time she needed.

Before she'd had too much time to wonder about what she'd do, El took hold of the channel herself. Moving close to it, there was that inexplicable feel of anticipation that always came just a second before discharging static electricity from her body onto something else.

Then she touched it, and the connection closed. And what came next truly *was* like a lightning bolt; El stood there dead-still, floating in the void, lightning-struck, not daring to move as much as a finger while an unimaginable amount of power was rushing through every last cell of her body, desperately seeking for some place to go.

And then, suddenly, *he* was there with her. At the lightning's other end stood Will himself, and across the channel their minds were linked. Here, then, suddenly and as forceful as the strike of power itself, Will's thoughts flooded in on her, and his life in all its cruelty and happiness, just as hers streamed back to him.

Together now, then. They were *both* here, now. Both their minds, both their memories, sucked in and screwed up and mixed and one and the same. The black room was there, and the schoolyard with Troy in it, and *oh!* All the things they had both seen, all the places where they both had been, the Upside Down, the loneliness, but also the comforting feeling of a pencil on paper, drawing.

This won't hold for long, they thought, and indeed already another little channel, another leader, had branched off El's body, seeking to carry the charge further out. But this time, it didn't start out into the direction of the monster; it went wherever El wanted it to go.

Just ... get ... it ... OUT! Together they screamed, and together they decided. Together, they threw the channel out as far as they could, away from the monster closing in behind them.

Will saw it fly out far, saw it strike someplace elsewhere far out and beyond, and connect once again. Rushing like some mile-high waterfall, he could feel it all streaming out of him.

Bye, El! he thought at her, and then the connection between them was broken into two. For a moment there was nothing but the image of it all moving far, far away, far out beyond anything known to

humanity and deep into the macroverse. The monster had missed its target. For a moment Will felt triumph. Then blackness closed in, and he almost fell asleep.

Will opened his eyes, and struggled to stand up. His seizure had stopped. Halfway through it he could feel someone grabbing him who grabbed him to his feet. Nimbly, he looked around. It was Jonathan. They were still in Hawkins Lab. Next to him, Mike was helping El to her feet as well. He raised his hand, and saw the skin there. It was still pale as a corpse's, but ... but he felt, oh he felt, he felt *alive*, just wonderfully alive as he hadn't done in *months*.

Around them the gunfire had ceased. His shaking was gone, too. Only a wreckage of alien flesh remained inside him, and that was as dead as dead can be, now.

Nimbly, still not really awake, Will looked around himself. The whole room was in ruins, even more so than before. The glass of what he guessed must be the sensory deprivation tank was gone, with shatters covering the floor all around it. He himself had acquired a few bloody cuts from splinters of glass that must've rained down on him, and he could see that the others had, too. A big ugly cut sat right in the middle of Jonathan's face, not that his brother seemed to care much while he pressed Will towards him.

Mike and El were in similar condition. Dustin had apparently joined their hug by now. Lucas stood a foot further, wrist-rocket still in hand. Next to him was Nancy, also still armed and ready. And ... was that Steve? Sure, Will'd seen Steve Harrington enter the building with all the others, had numbly registered him carrying El, but his presence still felt unexpected, somehow. Still, he was there, a bunch of photographs in one hand and a roll of film in the other that he waved towards someone whom Will couldn't see, spinning some absurd tale to keep the truce going for a few more moment.

His mum was there, too, crying softly while she reached out to hold his hand. Mr. Clarke was crouched down next to her, looking oddly out of place.

To his own surprise, the first thing anyone said aloud was from Will himself. "It'll pass, now," he told them. El, weak as she was, managed a nod and a smile at that. They'd done it. They'd really done it, Will thought, he'd just saved the world. *Listen right up, everyone! Ladies and gentlemen, here's your hero, Will Byers! The fag who saved the world!* That sounded ridiculous, even in his head. Still, he supposed he wasn't just some worthless freak after all. *The fag who saved the world.* He supposed he could live with that.

"You mean we'll get out of here?" his mother asked. And just in that moment all hell broke loose. With a sickening *crunch* half the ceiling came down, then a great towering, rapidly changing black thing emerged from nowhere at all to spring up through the walls, cracking everything in its way open like little toys as it did so like a horrible, incredibly fast-growing plant. Its surface seemed unreal, as if someone'd played a trick on Will's eyes; what really should've been a flat surface seemed to fluctuate, bounce around the place in a manner that Will knew shouldn't be possible. And Will knew why, and that it wasn't growing at all. It was just moving through here.

So that's what it looks like, he thought, *from here. From somewhere real.* He'd seen it before, after all, only then he'd been able to see *all* of it, in all its complex multi-dimensional geometry, passing the voids of the macroverse. Was *multi-dimensional* even the right word here? He'd have to ask Dustin, he guessed, or if he didn't know then Mr. Clarke.

"No," Mr. Clarke said, the first to understand what Will had truly meant, "he means it'll *pass*, literally. It just hasn't stopped in this slice of reality, and it's now traveling further out into space."

Yeah, he thought. *Wanted to use me as a lading beacon, showing it the way.* Only he and El had thrown that plan right out the window, and the beacon with it. Who knows where it was going now. Wherever the not-lightning had struck, presumably.

For a moment they all stood there, understanding dawning on them, while they contemplated the havoc they might've wreaked on some

other world further out that now lay in the monster's path.

Then the rest of the building creaked and started to collapse. Evidently it hadn't been built to withstand multi-dimensional creatures invading it sideways.

"*Let's go!*" Steve screamed, photographs still in hand, and ran down the hallway leading to the gate, the rest of the group following close behind (with Joyce and Dustin carrying Will and El, respectively). Behind them the guards screamed, and upon reaching the gate itself Will could just barely see how it had swollen, the thick black trunk — or leg, if one wanted to call it that — of the monster steadily increasing in size as the creature continued to move through dimensions.

In hindsight, his memories were patchy at best, but the next thing Will could remember was falling hard on a reeking patch of ground in the Upside Down. Dustin, who'd still been carrying him, must've simply jumped down through the gate and fallen over while doing so.

Around him he could hear the others hurrying down the ladder, or simply jumping as well. Someone screamed, but Will couldn't have said who. The ground seemed to shake again, though that might've also been his mind playing tricks on him. A horrible screech came from above, from the other side of the doorway. With a sudden *thump* a thick piece of ceiling landing right beside him, just as Lucas screamed "Get away from here! Get out from under the gate!"

Struggling, Will rolled himself out from under the portal. Steve turned up again, helping him to his feet. Behind them was the gate, and beyond that was Hawkins Lab, now falling in on itself.

And in front lay the Upside Down. Here and there lonely dead trees stood, struggling their way towards the bleak horizon. Little blueish things floated everywhere, things that Will knew only too well. He stopped breathing, trying very hard not to panic. One of them might've been what started all of this.

Then, suddenly, they stove away from him.

"Safe," El said. Will turned his head to her. She seemed to have

recovered again; Mike was still there, holding her hand, but it didn't look as if she'd actually needed his support to stand on her own. Her face might've been smeared with blood all over, but when she smiled it still lit up like few things else.

Safe, he thought, and smiled right back. *Yeah. It's good to be safe.*

Together, their strange party began its trek towards home, towards Hawkins. Steve still had a hand on Will's shoulder, steadying him every now and then, but for the most part Will managed to walk by himself again, now. Mike held El's hand, and that, Will guessed, was less support than something else ...

Dustin was the first to notice that the monster was gone from this reality. "I'd expected it would do that," Mr. Clarke said, "it's closer to our world now, and its size isn't infinite."

"It's passing across our world right this moment," Dustin concluded, and their science teacher nodded. Will tried not to think of where the monster might end up. Somewhere, someplace would be destroyed, and he'd be the one responsible ... except, he considered, the universe was *vast*. He'd gotten a glimpse of that, though that was already fading from his mind. Dimly, Will suspected that a human brain just wasn't made to comprehend enormity on such a scale.

But in any case, it was probably much more likely that wherever it ended up was a dead world. Out of nine planets known to Earth only one carried life, after all. And if it wasn't dead, if there was someone there who inhabited it ... well, maybe they'd send it on again. Hopefully they'd notice in time. Will knew it would take him a while, but he'd just have to resign himself to the (strong) possibility that he'd never know. And hell, maybe the monster'd turn up somewhere just to get eaten by something even bigger. Maybe that turtle he'd seen would just swallow it up. Would serve the thing right, getting eaten by a turtle of all things.

They were almost at the gate leading back home when Will thought of one other thing that had yet to be taken care of. At first, after he'd done this weird thing with El, he'd thought it'd be over.

And it still was, nothing in him had come back; in a very fundamental way, the thing inside him was *dead*, and not resurrecting itself any time soon, but it was still *there*. There was, quite literally, a corpse inside Will's body, the dead remains of a failed parasite. Maybe it'd been busy drugging his system while it'd still been alive so he wouldn't notice, but now, walking through the dead forest with the bleak horizon above, Will had slowly grown aware of the weight that he carried. It wasn't much, but enough so that he noticed it. A lump of maybe a pound or two sitting somewhere inside his stomach. Something that would direct incoming monsters onto him, and occasionally spit out the odd slug or two.

Discretely, attempting not to be noticed by any of the others, he wrung free of Steve's supporting grip and slowly walked closer up to El, taking the opposite side from Mike.

Strange to think that he'd never felt that *thing* before, at least not like this. Of course, on some level he'd been aware that there must be *something* inside him that spit out slugs, it just hadn't been something that he'd thought much about. Considering the disgust he now felt, the idea that it must've drugged him with something simmered back to the forefront of his mind. *Time to wonder later*, he told himself, *you've got to tell her. She offered to help*. Knowing now what was inside him and that El'd seen it from the start, it was almost inexplicable for him that she'd still chosen to stay in his room.

"El," he started, his voice almost a whisper. When she turned her head to look at him, he stumbled over his own words for a moment, still not really wanting to admit that he needed help, or at least not just how *much* he needed it.

"You ... I ... can you just get it out? Of me? All of it?"

For half a second she glanced at him, and Will shivered as he realized she must just be looking *inside* his body, trying to estimate how bad the damage was. Then, to his immeasurable relief, she gave a curt

nod.

They walked a few steps further, El softly telling Mike in short words what she was going to do. In the background Will could hear that Steve'd joined up with Mr. Clarke, cracking his usual bad jokes and getting annoyed sighs in reply. Obviously they had history; Will could just imagine Steve making any sort of usual teaching impossible ... although, to be fair, Steve's mindless babbling had also apparently saved their neck for a couple of minutes; he dimly remembered him waving some photographs in front of the soldiers' heads. Will wondered what had actually been *on* them, and how it'd stopped them from being attacked ...

Numb, he realized he was taking any opportunity he got to not think about what would come next.

Except, it seemingly didn't happen at all, at least not at first.

At first, El went over to Lucas.

"There's a ... box," she said, pointing of into the woods, "somewhere there."

Lucas nodded. "Yeah, I remember you telling me about it," he answered her, "in fact, I'm almost sure which one you meant. I mean, I think I know where it is on the other side, so I guess I should be able to find it here, too."

"Can you?" El asked him, "Find it? Take what's inside."

"Yeah, sure." And with that, Lucas strolled off into the woods as if there was nothing to it.

"Hey, wait, you can't just send him off alone!" That was his mum's voice. Jonathan assured her he'd follow Lucas, and then was gone as well.

The rest of them had stopped walking further somewhere in the middle of it; Mike now stared at him, face bland and shocked while others stared expectantly around the group, unsure what exactly was going on. Dimly, Will realized he'd have to say something. *It's dealt with*, he told himself, *the main stuff's over, this is just cleaning up odd*

ends. You can tell them, now. No. You should've told them before.

"Okay," he began, trying to sound strong but almost immediately breaking. "Okay," he repeated, though not as loud this time, "there's ahm ... there's something that ..."

Mike, whom El had presumably told what it was that needed doing — why else would he look that pale, that shocked? — took over for him. "Ahm, Dustin? Could you just —" together, they each took one of Will's shoulders, holding him where he was. "Okay, and er ... the rest of you, just stay where you are."

El stepped right in front of him, but still with a generous distance between them. "Ready?" she asked.

Will breathed in, deep. For a moment he felt fear, but then that was gone. "Ready," he said.

Across from him, El lowered her head somewhat, into that intense staring pose she always assumed when doing things like that. Will closed his eyes. He didn't want to see it.

For a moment, then, he was alone with himself, and nothing happened. Then, slowly, he could feel *it* move. His insides felt like someone'd given them a good stir, and suddenly Will was retching, choking, vomiting. A few sad remains of his last meal left his mouth; he hadn't eaten since lunch at school, after all, and that was probably more than twelve hours ago, by now. Spittle followed. And then ...

Will could *feel* it sliding up his throat. It wasn't something he'd ever felt before, because nothing can compare to the feeling that a two-pound dead creature of horror makes while being forcibly moved upwards through one's throat, but if he'd been asked to convey it in one single word, that word would've been *disgust*. And it took a lot longer than he would've liked; at some point he couldn't breathe, and shortly after that felt how El was pressing the thing into a different shape, maybe even splitting it up ...

Finally it came out, a giant lump thrown through his teeth. If he'd thought that the slugs had tasted awful, then he didn't know what this was. In a way, it was *like* the slugs, but also increased a

thousand-fold. Again, in one word? Disgusting.

Still with his eyes closed he almost fell over from half chocking on it, with only Dustin and Mike keeping him standing. Then he flinched, violently, when he heard the sound of Nancy's gun being released.

At last, when it was over, Mike and Dustin gently maneuvered him a few steps away, and turned him so he'd look into the other direction, away from the thing that he'd retched up. Will was grateful that they'd thought of that.

When he opened his eyes again, the first thing that Will did was to sit down on the ground, legs drawn close to his chest, arms slung around them.

His skin was still that of a corpse, but at least inside it felt ... not good, no, that would yet take a while, but ... right. *Human*. Like there'd been a demon in there for too long that was now gone. Nimbly he thought of Bilbo Baggins, and the One Ring. Maybe it was a little like that, except at least the ring'd made sure to keep its owner happy, at least for a while. But in either case, the owner hadn't been okay.

I'm not, either. But maybe we'll get better, he'd told El, when she'd admitted to not being okay. Well, maybe this was it. Still not okay, but perhaps a little closer to it. It took him a while until he had actually understood that, until he could actually believe that maybe things were — slowly, but all the same — growing brighter again.

Will took a deep breath. El still kept the little floating things away from him, so that was safe. Mike sat down next to him, then El on the other side. His mum knelt down opposite to him and took her son into her arms, trying to keep back tears.

It's okay now, he thought, *it's over. Or at least close to being over*. He still had that taste in his mouth, the horrible feeling of having something rotten and corrupted there, drowning out most other sensations. It was the same taste that had driven him to seek relief in even more pain, in adding thin white lines to his upper arms, hidden beneath his shirts ... but that, too, was over now, and thank God for that.

Now, he could just grip his mum tight, and cry for some moments. And for once he didn't hate himself while doing so. A strange feeling, but sort of a good one, too. El and Mike both had one arm on his shoulders, and when Dustin threw himself on top of them and joined the group-hug Will couldn't even pretend to be surprised. They almost fell over, a tangled ball of bodies with little coordination, but somehow they managed to stay up together. And they were laughing, too, out of relief. Laughing!

It'd been a while since he'd done that. Since he'd *sincerely* done that, and not just pretended.

It took a long while before they all separated again, and by then Lucas and Jonathan had come back. Surprisingly, Lucas held what looked like a lunch box, which he gave to El before hugging Will as well. Jonathan smiled at him, too.

El opened the box, and handed him one of the things that'd been inside. At first Will didn't recognize what it was, but when he did it seemed so obvious he almost wanted to laugh out loud. *Eggos*. Of course. What else would it be, with her?

"They help with the taste," El told him. And though his hands were still shivering slightly, Will took a small, careful bite, somewhat unsure if eating something right now, with him still in this state was such a good idea ... but, oh God! did that waffle help with the taste. Will wolfed it down. The awful feeling of rottenness was still *there*, but only a fraction of what'd been there before.

El gave him another one, and he ate that one as well. Nothing had ever tasted so sweet, so nice, so *alive*. For a moment or two, there was nothing else in the world. Suddenly Will understood why El was so obsessed with these waffles; there was something special about the first thing one tasted when life started getting brighter.

"Uh, there was something else, too," Jonathan said, "Lucas?"

"Oh, yeah, I almost forgot. Someone's left a letter in that box. Ah ... here," he handed a folded scrap of paper to El. She opened it, and though she struggled (and needed the occasional help of Mr. Clarke and Lucas) she slowly read it aloud to them:

Eleven, it began,

since this box hasn't been emptied for almost a week now, I'll assume that you're not there anymore.

Hope you're safe someplace else, now. But don't tell me where; they'd know.

If you can, go to Joyce Byers (Will's house), or to Mike, they will help you better than I could.

I'm sorry for what happened, and for what I did. I hope you're happier now.

— Chief Jim Hopper.

PS: should you ever find this, then I really hope that you can read ...

For a moment there was silence. Then El smiled, her entire being a bright torch of happiness even in the bleak darkness of the Upside Down.

“Yes,” she said quietly, “I can read, now.” Looking at her, Will could see a single tear trickling down her face. “And I’m happy, too.”

She smiled again, and then spoke, sobbing: “Let’s go home.”

Together, their group of ten walked further through the dead, barren wood of the Upside Down, where El created a gate that opened back onto Hawkins, Indiana, Earth.

Notes for the Chapter:

Oh God, this chapter was a beast to edit. Also I just noticed that that throwaway line about the turtle swallowing the monster could, if the turtle really is

the one from *IT*, be what it choked on before the Losers made it back ... yeah, that's depressing ...

In any case, this chapter wraps it pretty much up; there's still two more coming, but those are more epilogue, so I guess you might call this the last "proper" chapter of this story.

Oh, I also just realized that I don't actually know how much was known about lightning strikes behavior in '84; even today, it seems (from what I can tell) to be a rather esoteric and strange field, with lots and lots of unanswered questions. But then again, it's said that she thinks about it that way "later", so I guess that could also safely refer to the modern day ...

Any thoughts on the chapter?

17. Intersection

The town of Hawkins, Indiana, had been asleep when it began. Reconstructions that got made only years after the fact put the beginning of the peculiar event that was about to happen at around 4:30am, but the truth was that no one save a group of ten ever knew the exact happenings, and they kept the secret among themselves. Decades into the future a new generation would find their parent's diaries and read the account that a certain Mr. Scott Clarke had written down, of what he called the *Intersection*, but for now, on the 26th of February of the year 1984 AD, no one knew what was happening.

When the residents finally awoke at dawn from uneasy sleep, when they drew their curtains away from the windows they were astounded that it had neither snowed nor rained during the night, although several times they had been woken from their slumbers by what had sounded, to them, like great, powerful thunder.

Tranquility prevailed, then, for a few more moments before they saw the apparition that had morphed into being above the town. *The Ghost-Spider of Hawkins*, it got christened years later by conspiracy theorists who had come to visit the site. *Ghost-Spider* mostly because no one, not even the craziest theorist, could ever quite believe that it had been more than simply smoke and mirrors. But that was not the truth.

The truth was that on February the 26th of the year 1984 there hung above Hawkins a gigantic, ink-black being, miles above the town and at least a mile in diameter itself, connected to the ground by six enormous legs, legs so enormous they might as well have been called towers; towers that were higher than any building within the United States, or anywhere else on Earth. Anyone who looked at it could feel dread rising in their throats without reason, and see how it seemed to suck in even the light around it into its all-encompassing unnatural blackness. Accounts (save for the one by Mr. Scott Clarke) vary on what exactly took place in Hawkins on the day of that nameless monster, but they do agree that most or all residents stayed inside their houses, frightened or praying (or both). Not a single student or

teacher appeared at any school, the public library remained closed; had anyone called the police no one would have answered. Only one man ever claimed to have gone outside that day, though few ever really believed him. He was the chief of the local police, a man named James Hopper, who claimed to have left his house outside Hawkins a little after eight, with a singular destination fixed in his mind.

On his lonely pilgrimage to the military exclusion zone he met not a single soul. There he became the first man to find the ruins of what had once been Hawkins Lab, built and run by the US Department of Energy. Or so he said; not many ever believed him, and no one ever wanted to dwell on the issue. The fact that he was little known and lived outside the town itself, where none could confirm his story, only intensified that distrust.

For certain is only that in the days and weeks afterwards five desolate craters were found around the town, each a circular stretch of dead land where there had once been life. And though some might have noticed that those five were arranged so as to mark out five corners of a regular hexagon, few ever figured out that the missing sixth crater was in what was left of Hawkins Lab, which had been reduced to rubble and smoke during the event.

The US Department of Energy quietly closed their *Research Lab Hawkins, Indiana* not a month later, with no more than a few lines filed in an internal log, and a slightly different equation calculating budget numbers for the future. In the years to come only rumors were left to roam, far and wide across the entirety of the United States of America and beyond. Rumors about the black, torched stone of Hawkins Lab. Rumors of inexplicable plants and biology dwelling in the area. At first many saw a connection to the AIDS crisis in it, then in later decades some were convinced it was somehow involved with drug research, and then later fewer still were sure that there had been a connection to the falling of the twin towers on Ground Zero in New York City, though none could ever adequately explain why that should be so. In short, they were conspiracy theorists of the highest order, quick to make up stories and slow to abandon their beliefs in them.

But the residents of town itself noticed little of those people; a new

cheap hotel was opened for the occasional gawker, conspiracy theorist or tourist, but apart from that Hawkins remained the quiet, sleepy town that it had always been since the first European settlers had made the trek inland.

But on that singular, terrifying day that no one would ever speak about openly, no one left their house for fear and overpowering panic until the monster vanished into nothing during the next night, with just as little explanation as during its appearance. Many lay rolled up in their beds the entire day, blankets drawn over their heads.

Many, but not all of them. In a comfortable house at the end of Maple Street sat a group of twelve at the dinner table, eating roast chicken with potatoes and seemingly not having a care in the world. Jonathan Byers handed out photographs showing a happy El with Eggos to her and her friends. For the first time in a long while, their lives seemed to be truly bright. That wasn't quite true, of course; worries and pain, and the memory of more than that would never leave them. But at least for the moment their world was a happy one, which they felt was enough; and that, there and then and always, was the truth.

Notes for the Chapter:

Almost at the end, now. I'm still writing on a proper epilogue, which I guess I'll publish either this evening or tomorrow ...

Any thoughts?

18. Coda

After school and A/V club their entire group rushed straight out the school building and to their bikes. Three days had passed since that eventful Monday night, and for some reason Thursday afternoon always seemed to be the busiest of the week, except possibly for Friday, when everyone tried to get home early. Nonetheless, their group of four wormed its way through the traffic, occasionally taking harsh turns and risking maneuvers that would've made any adult scream from terror.

They, of course, didn't. After all, Will, Mike, Dustin and Lucas knew how to handle their bikes. Will especially rejoiced in using his; it'd been so long since he'd actually dared to do that. But things were safer now, for him, he felt, and during the last three days he'd felt an irresistible urge to spend as much time as humanly possible outside the house, no matter the freezing temperature outside. Somehow, it felt like he had some catching up to do.

Mike, obviously, just couldn't get to Will's house fast enough. El was there, and that was reason enough to drive a bit more daring than normal.

Lucas and Dustin just hurried to follow the other two. After all, *someone* had to keep an eye on them; those past three days they'd been so enthusiastic about anything and everything it seemed only a matter of time until something stupid happened.

When they reached the Byers' house at the edge of the forest there wasn't even any need to knock. El was already waiting outside, a coat loaned from Nancy keeping her warm, standing there and smiling once she'd caught sight of her friends. Will's mum only made a brief appearance, telling the others that Jonathan was at work but he'd join them shortly, and reminding them to stay safe.

When they drove off again, El and Mike double-riding on the boy's bike, she sighed. It was hard, letting Will go like this, without immediate protection by either herself or Jonathan — she trusted his friends, of course, but not quite enough to trust them with Will's life; kids of any age were more prone to risks, she still remembered that

from her own youth — but she guessed she had to. If there'd ever been a time to quit this strange state of perpetual fear and anxiousness that'd dominated the last three months, then it seemed to be now.

They'll be safe, she thought to herself, *and they know how to take care of each other.*

Still, watching them race each other down the road leading back into Hawkins, it was hard hard for her to let them go.

When Steve pulled up into the parking lot of what had, three months before, been Benny's Burgers and was now Bob's Fried Chickens there was a disorganized heap of children's bikes already laying there just next to entrance. Nancy, who was on the passenger seat, looked vaguely amused at the sight of them. "Are you actually sure you that you want to do this?" she asked him. "You know, they can get ... intense."

Steve considered that. "So you mean," he said, turning the engine off, "that I'll fit right in?"

Nancy couldn't help but to smile while leaving the car. When they got inside the boys and El had already taken and occupied a table and were excitedly chattering among themselves, apparently discussing when their next DnD campaign would take place, and whether or not El wanted to play with them then, and if she even knew enough about the game to do that. They'd left three seats free; Steve and Nancy took two of them and joined in on the general chattering.

Jonathan arrived ten minutes late; he'd pushed it for all that it'd been worth, but work shifts simply wouldn't move around that easily. It'd been a long day, but trying to set a date that all of the kids' parents had found acceptable hadn't been easy in the first place, especially after they'd gone mysteriously gone missing for an entire night just half a week before. Especially Dustin's had seemed like a pest on that,

though Jonathan could somewhat understand them. Had he been in their place, had he not known were Will'd been for an entire night without any explanation, he'd probably would've been more than just worried as well. And if having this at all meant coming late, then Jonathan would take it, sure. With the shift just finished, he might even have enough money for it without them running low on money later in the month, though of course that wasn't the point.

Stepping inside the fast food place, it was impossible miss them. Just take the largest, loudest table whose occupants annoyed the entire rest of the restaurant. Nancy, Steve, Will and his friends, El, they were all already there, and turned to look at him expectantly once they saw that he'd come in.

They'd waited for him, he realized. Every now and then, little things like that still got to him; things that, in retrospect, seemed obvious but that he hadn't really expected of anyone. But there wasn't any food yet on their table yet, and one chair was left free for him. Smiling, relieved that the day's work was over, he went over to them and sat down. Being here felt weird just by itself, he realized; not only had he practically never seen a restaurant from the inside before, but the only one that he'd occasionally visited with his mum and Will was exactly this one, but *before*. It was different now. Whoever this Bob was (if he existed at all and wasn't just some marketing thing) seemed to like bright colors and chrome; the entire thing looked like a bright explosion of colorful plastic walls, though the chairs were more shiny metal than anything else.

Weirdly, he found that he liked it; a bit of color, he felt, was appropriate right now.

"How was your day?" Nancy asked him. Soon after that they were already lost in conversation, telling her about his day at school and work, joking softly about Mrs. Andros's antics and listening to her mild frustration about the latest essay she'd had to write in turn. Nice, really, talking about meaningless bullshit for a change.

"You're complete now?" The owner's voice came from behind the bar.

"Yep," Steve called back, "just give us everything you've got. They'll

eat it,” he said, pointing at the kids.

For half a second Jonathan was back worrying about money, but it seemed Steve’d thought of that, too. “I’ll pay it,” he said, turned to him, and when Jonathan was on the verge of opening his mouth again Steve added, “come on, man, free meal’s in order. You gotta accept that not everything in life is shit all the time.”

“You don’t even have a job,” Jonathan told him. *I’m not comfortable to be living of someone else’s money.*

“Naw, I nicked it off my parents.” Seeing Jonny Boy’s incredulous stare, he continued with “don’t be worried, risk’s on me, not you. Tough I doubt they’ll notice either way ... and at least this way the money ends up doing something useful.”

Just then the first batch of food arrived — French fries, chicken nuggets, entire chicken legs and wings, all fried or roasted — and Jonathan suddenly realized how damned hungry he actually was, leading him to conclude that really, what was he worrying about? Just take the food.

Further down the table, where Dustin and Mike sat on either side of El, with Lucas and Will across the table from them, a heated discussion was going on for minutes now.

“I bet you I can eat more than you,” Dustin had declared, meaning El; the picture of her basically inhaling that chocolate pudding hadn’t left him in peace since that day in the little chamber next to the staff room of Hawkins Middle School. And here and now, then, Dustin saw his chance of rematch, which he was determined to take and win.

El didn’t even deign to answer him, she just looked at him, sadly, her face a perfect display of compassion for someone who’d not yet realized that he was already done for. The better he got to know her, the more Dustin thought that even though she didn’t speak much, she also didn’t really *need* to speak much. Most of the time, it was clear what she meant anyways.

“I’m with El,” Mike declared. “Yeah,” Will added, “I live in the same house with her ... I mean, Dustin, with respect, you do eat a lot, but

if you'd ever seen her at breakfast ...”

Lucas, meanwhile, declared for Dustin. “Well at least someone here has to be realistic,” was all he cared to give for comment.

And when just a moment later the food appeared, ending the discussion — at least temporarily — everyone kept a good look at the small heaps of leftover bones that started to pile up on Dustin and El’s table. Not that it stopped anyone else from eating their fill, of course.

After their initial hunger was halfway stilled, Mike asked the question that’d been bugging him ever since Mr. Clarke’s initial explanation about what had happened that day in Hawkins Lab (his mum would’ve been scandalized; his mouth was still full of fries he was busily stuffing inside himself. Alas, his mum was absent. Mike found that he quite liked that): “So,” he said, looking at El and Will, both chewing on chicken, “if I understood that right, then the monster *isn’t* dead, but just gone somewhere else?”

He’d wanted to ask that for days, but only now, when everyone was too happy to really formulate a bad thought did he feel safe enough to actually say it out loud.

El answered. Or, well, she just nodded; her mouth was too busy clawing the meat of a chicken wing to actually say anything meaningful aloud.

“But I mean, *where*? Is there, like, *more* than the Upside Down?”

El finished her chicken leg, and carefully lay the bones to the other four on her plate. Then she took one look at Dustin’s (he’d already collected five; she’d fallen behind, *dammit*), then decided she had no time to answer and tore right into the closest bit of meat that she could get her hands on. It happened to be Mike’s half-eaten chicken leg, but Mike didn’t care; he could still teach her table manners some other time.

“Yeah, I think.” That was Will, his voice lower, more careful than

normal, but also without even a trace of fear. *It's really over, now*, he told himself, *and memories can't hurt you if you don't let them*. Well, he wasn't about to let himself be hurt, not anymore.

"I think ... I think there's a lot more than just the here and the Upside Down. I sort of ... got a glimpse of that, when the thing was still inside me." Though his memory of that was fading quickly now, he'd found; maybe, Will considered, a human brain just wasn't made to hold that kind of information. It took up too much space. "And there *was* more. Like, a bigger universe, if that makes any sense to you? With our world and other just sort of floating around in it." Naw, there'd been more, something ... floating was the wrong word to describe it, he felt, but Will also considered that maybe there just *was* no word that'd fit the glimpse of what he'd got. Maybe that was it.

"There was a turtle," he said suddenly, remembering it swimming through the endless voids.

If anything, Mike looked entirely perplexed now.

"So, you mean, now the monster's just gone by us and on its way to somewhere else?"

Will nodded.

"Actually," Dustin tuned himself into the conversation between bites, then paused to lick grease from his fingers before continuing, "I asked Mr. Clarke about it, and he said that, mathematically, there's nothing impossible or even weird about a space with more than three dimensions. Apparently there's an entire field about stuff called *n*-dimensional spaces, and *n* can even be infinite in some cases, though I'm not sure if I really understood that part; there's some really weird shit in that, even Mr. Clarke says he doesn't fully get how all that works. Oh, and there was something else about spaces which don't really have more *dimensions*, but just a lot more *space*, and there's more than just one parallel line going through every — oh, hang on, I'm falling behind here!" Accusingly he looked at his rival in the eating contest, then grabbed the next bit of chicken and wolfed it down. "El, you're not being fair! You're not talking nearly as much, that's cheating!" He made a good job of sounding indignant, but El could see the smile on his face, too.

“Not my fault,” she said, laughing as well, and proudly pointing her score out to him. The pile of leftover bones on her plate seemed considerable larger than his, now.

“Still not fair,” Dustin whispered, before getting back to eating.

“Actually, what are you guys doing over there?” That was Steve, who’d apparently overheard half their conversation.

“They’re arguing about who can eat more,” Mike explained, “him and El.”

“Yeah, they made a bet of it,” Lucas added. “I think Dustin’s gonna win, but they all said El.”

Steve considered that, then said, “You could’ve told me, I might’ve played along with you. No chance for you then. Anyways, too late. But I think I’ve gotta say Dustin, now.” He took a good long look at both the plates, then told Dustin, “Actually, hurry up, man, she’s way ahead of you.”

“No real surprise,” commented Jonathan. “Do you know how much more I cook since she started living with us?”

“What do you get if you win?” Steve asked them.

“More chicken?” Lucas suggested, then shrugged and took another bite of his own portion. Really, he had no idea why they even thought it was important, but it did make for something fun to banter about, so.

“The journey’s its own reward,” Dustin managed to get out between bites.

“Ah,” Steve conceded to his point, “Sounds reasonable. Hey Nance, what do you think, who’s gonna win?”

Nancy, who’d stared at the entire display with something of morbid fascination while they’d been talking just rolled her eyes at all of it. Sometimes it seemed like her boyfriend really *was* just an overgrown kid. After some while (and some more devoured chicken and fries), she finally commented, “This is so sick actually, you know, how can

anyone *eat* that much?” and then left it that.

“How can you *not*?” Dustin and El both shot back, and almost at the same time.

Steve chuckled. “You know, they’ve got a point, Nance,” he said, before grabbing another handful of fries. Nancy just sighed in irritation.

“Actually, Steve,” Jonathan began, when all but El and Dustin had long stopped eating, “what did you tell those guards, in the lab? I didn’t really notice, I was with Will, but I remember that at some point they stopped shooting at us.”

“Yeah, I wondered about that, too,” Mike said, and even El paused between bites for long enough to demand “tell us.”

“I mean, it was probably something really dumb,” Dustin suspected, “but I’d like to know, too.”

And though for a moment Steve looked annoyed — or was that actually embarrassment? On Steve Harrington? Surely not — he began to talk.

“Ah, ya, well, they stopped shooting at us somewhere in that, I dunno, maybe they had to reload or something, or just wanted to give us a chance to surrender ... so anyways, I was thinking to myself that we really couldn’t stay behind that glass thing forever, so I rummaged through the backpack of Jonny Boy here —” Jonathan did, he believed, a good job at looking just as confused about that nickname as everyone else did — figuring that there’d probably still be some photographs of the gates in there.”

“There weren’t, actually,” Jonathan told him, “the ones you took were five copies of El with the Eggo, that I gave you all later at Nancy’s house. I’d given Nancy the others earlier in the afternoon.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t notice that until later, and apparently neither did they. Must’ve looked ridiculous, in any case — anyways, so I grabbed those and took a roll of film as well, put my hands up like I’d

surrender so they wouldn't just shoot me and went out there." He paused for a moment, unsure on how to continue. "Well, I guess you can imagine the rest."

"You shittalked them," Lucas said, earning himself some chuckle from the others.

"Yeah, basically. I don't know, I don't think I was making much sense out there. Just told them something about how we had pictures of everything, but then I noticed that given that they'd actually have *more* reason to shoot us so I said that all I had was just a copy, and that we had someone who'd already fled the building, and ... I don't even know. Must've contradicted myself a dozen times there, but the guy in the coat seemed to be listening, and as long as he did that the soldiers wouldn't shoot anyone, so ... I guess it worked out fine."

For a moment his story was greeted with silence.

Then Jonathan spoke: "I gotta say, though, I did expect it'd make for a better story."

"*What?*" Steve did his best to look insulted, though he couldn't quite manage it, not when Jonny Boy was doing one of his rare sarcastic jokes, "how that's not enough for you, man?"

"Yeah," Will tuned in in support of his brother, "they probably just didn't shoot you because you sounded too much like a retard to be an actual threat."

For a moment there was an absolute, almost shocked silence, a short moment that they all needed before they could comprehend what had just happened. Will Byers, boy who'd been living in limbo at best for near three months now had just cracked a joke. A poor one, maybe, but a *joke!*

The laugh that followed it, then, was all the louder for it. Something inexplicable, some unseen barrier (or maybe a sword, like in that old Greek legend) had suddenly been lifted from them and was gone now. It sounded stupid, sure, but they all felt that suddenly they were breathing easier, that their thoughts were freer than they'd been before.

“Says the boy with the bowlcut,” was Steve’s weak (and much too late) attempt at a comeback, though no one really listened to him anymore. They had already paired off into other groups, making jokes without reason or sense, laughing at each other’s stupidity and clumsiness with words, thinking everything hilarious. A certain feeling filled settled over all of them, which the oldest three of the party recognized as the feeling of being drunk or high; and indeed Bob, the man who owned the place and ran the grill shot one or two looks of slight worry into their direction, wondering to himself if maybe one of the older boys had smuggled some booze into the youngsters’ drinks — except of course they weren’t high on alcohol or any other drug, just on happiness itself.

They stayed late, until the sun came down; and while they were all busy stuffing themselves full of French fries and chicken and then maybe later had a bowl of chocolate pudding or a waffle for afters, they were content, and that was the truth.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry that this took so long. Got sidetracked watching the first three episodes of season two ...

Anyways, this is it! The very last chapter, which I think should wrap the few question that were still there up as nicely as I could manage.

I hope you enjoyed this fic.

Any thoughts on it?